

Strengthening Citizen-Government Partnerships for Monitoring Frontline Service Delivery in South Africa

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Abstract: *The recently adopted “Framework for Strengthening Citizen-Government Partnerships for Monitoring Service Delivery” highlights the importance of citizen voice in monitoring government service delivery. This framework, supported by a Cabinet resolution, requires government departments that provide services to the public to systematically incorporate the views and experiences of citizens in their monitoring and evaluation systems. This is to drive service delivery improvements and build constructive partnerships based on the production and use of monitoring evidence at the frontline of service delivery. This paper discusses the framework, its implications for government, as well as a pilot project that is envisaged in the framework.*

Introduction

South Africa's Cabinet approved the “Framework for Strengthening Citizen-Government Partnerships for Monitoring Service Delivery” in August 2013. The framework was developed by the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) and was shaped by a consultation process with civil society representatives and government officials. It aims to support the institutionalization of citizen-based monitoring (CBM) in government's monitoring and evaluation systems, as well as confirming the value that civil society monitoring efforts provide to building a democratic state and strengthening government.

The framework provides the following definition of citizen-based monitoring:

Citizen-based monitoring (CBM) is an approach to monitoring government performance that focuses on the experiences of ordinary citizens in order to strengthen public accountability and drive service delivery improvements. It requires citizens to be active participants in shaping what is monitored, how the monitoring is done and what interpretations and actions are derived from the data. (DPME, 2013, p. 7)

It further recognizes that “citizen-based monitoring can be driven by government departments (engaging directly with individual citizens); through partnerships with organized civil society; and undertaken as independent civil society initiatives.” (DPME, 2013, p. 8)

The approval of the framework is an important milestone in a process that is envisaged in the 2010-14 Strategic Plan of DPME and that began in 2011 with DPME undertaking research into existing monitoring initiatives and a convening a workshop with civil society and government officials to explore models for what was then referred to as independent CBMA (community-based monitoring and accountability). The focus was also on facilitating more constructive relationships between civil society and government. (DPME, 2011).

The framework asserts that the “experiences of citizens – the intended beneficiaries of government services – are a critical component in measuring the performance of government and for the delivery of appropriate and quality services.” (DPME, 2013, p. 7) It further states that “citizens cannot be passive recipients if government is to deliver services that address real needs. The process of citizens working jointly with government to produce information on service delivery fosters active citizenry and contributes to building a capable and developmental state.” (ibid)

The framework takes forward a narrative in the National Development Plan that highlights the need to strengthen routine accountability at the point at which citizen's encounter the state. (National Planning Commission, 2012)

Problem Statement

The framework presents the following problem statement:

The participation of citizens in monitoring government service delivery is ad hoc and in many sectors not present. It is currently not valued as a way to enhance the efficiency and productiveness of service delivery. (DPME, 2013, p. 3)

The problem statement is informed by the findings of DPME's Frontline Service Delivery Monitoring project, which since 2011 has assessed the quality of service delivery at over 400 frontline service facilities, including courts, police stations, clinics, schools and drivers license testing centers. These unannounced monitoring visits found little to no evidence of mechanisms to monitor service delivery from the experience of citizens. Where complaint systems and surveys were utilized there was insufficient attention paid to this feedback and a lack of analysis and use of the information in planning and implementation.

The framework identifies the current emphasis of government's monitoring as "being on internal government processes with the voice of the citizen largely absent. This presents a risk, as the picture is not complete. It is therefore necessary to support the uptake of systematic ways to bring the experiences of citizens into the monitoring of services. This will provide a measure of the gap between the perceived and the actual experiences of service delivery, for both user and provider." (DPME, 2013, p. 7)

The Public Service Commission further describes the current public participation practices in South Africa as being "too much of a public relations exercise" and calls for alternative approaches to be tested in practice. (Public Service Commission, 2011, p. 54)

Principles

The framework provides a set of principles to inform the institutionalization of citizen-based monitoring. These principles are the product of the consultation process, reflecting input from both government and civil society. They are presented below: (DPME, 2013, pp. 18,19)

As a democratic nation, the voice of citizens is integral to building a capable, developmental state in South Africa - This first principle is derived from the Constitution which requires that people's needs must be responded to; the public must be encouraged to participate in policy-making; public administration must be accountable and transparency must be fostered by providing the public with timely, accessible and accurate information.

Government monitoring systems need to include the views and experiences of citizens - Government monitoring systems are regarded as incomplete without mechanisms to incorporate the views of citizens on service delivery - mechanisms that will enable the verification of internally produced monitoring findings. In assessing the quality of information used for performance monitoring, departments should also assess whether the information has been verified using independent citizen monitoring mechanisms. These mechanisms need to be methodologically sound, ensure independence and relevance and be agreed to by stakeholders.

Government departments must encourage independent monitoring by civil society - Citizens have a right and a responsibility to monitor government, even when this is a cause for discomfort within government. It is a necessary check and balance and is required for healthy democracy. Government institutions should know the civil society monitoring initiatives that are operating in their sectors and create platforms to regularly engage on findings and approaches. This engagement should be at an appropriate level and include government decision makers to ensure that research findings influence service delivery improvements where problems are identified. The risk that civil society organizations can be used to pursue party political agendas needs to be wisely managed, without losing sight of the valuable role played by civil society in a democratic society.

Citizen-based monitoring is not simply about data collection, it is an on-going process of relationship building and performance improvement - Citizen-based monitoring is about building a relationship of trust between citizens and government around the improvement of government services. Citizen-based monitoring mechanisms should provide predictable and systematized opportunities for citizens to provide feedback on issues that are relevant to them, not only to provide insights into service delivery but also to improve services at a local level. Citizen-based monitoring must be accountable, credible and locally driven.

Citizen participation in planning strengthens citizen participation in monitoring - The involvement of citizens in monitoring is influenced by the extent to which they have participated in, and are informed of, the programmes planned for implementation, the resources committed and expected deliverables. This means that the process should start with consultations, mobilization and dialogues which will inform the development of plans and establish the basis for effective citizen involvement in monitoring of services. It also follows that citizen involvement in monitoring will strengthen citizen involvement in the next cycle of planning. It is important that monitoring is linked to planning processes.

Citizen-based monitoring must form an integral part of service delivery improvement plans and management decision-making processes - Citizen-based monitoring must form part of the business processes of service delivery and improvement plans. Information produced through CBM should be regarded as a core component of the service delivery value chain and should be used by managers and planners in planning and budgeting processes, both at the frontline level as well as higher up in the system. CBM needs to be institutionalized through training and should form part of performance expectations of staff to ensure that findings feed into decision-making. In terms of development of Service Delivery Improvement Plans (SDIP), all national and provincial levels of government responsible for the implementation of the Public Service Act and Regulations are expected to display their service charter and standards to make it easier for stakeholders to monitor performance. Mechanisms should be in place to monitor compliance to SDIPs and charters.

Monitoring mechanisms should be workable and suit the context in which they are applied – Citizen participation in monitoring is a core requirement of effective service delivery. It is not a nice-to-have. This means that mechanisms must be workable, funded and integrated in core business processes. As such the mechanisms should not be overly complicated and ambitious. They should be appropriate to the context in which they are deployed and sustainable in terms of the available resources and skills. This requires investment in the design and testing of mechanisms before going to scale, as well as change management strategies, and monitoring and evaluation of implementation.

Monitoring findings and planned improvements need to be communicated to citizens timeously - Citizens need to be part of a feedback loop. It is essential that the system for compiling and distributing reports is efficient and has a quick turn-around. Accountability and feedback about how the information is used for decision-making by departments can help build trust between citizens and government. Feedback should include details of corrective actions to be taken, timeframes and who is responsible.

Communication strategies must be informed by the target audience - Communication should be appropriate to the people it is aimed at. Websites are useful for users who have access to computers and the internet, but not for people who do not use these media. The choice of language is also a factor to be considered, as well as levels of literacy and communications norms. Where appropriate, community radio should also be considered, as it remains a powerful means of communication and information dissemination. The key is to include the users in the design of the feedback system in order to understand what works for them. Each citizen-based monitoring plan should explicitly consider the communication requirements for success. This includes communicating about the service delivery programme, planned improvements, a timeline for improvements and opportunities for citizens to monitor. Communication should also demonstrate how the department and facility will receive information and how it will use the information; how it will ensure that the data gets to decision makers; how it will communicate the monitoring results back to users; and how it will share lessons, experiences and successes.

What this means for government M&E systems going forward

The Cabinet resolution requires that government departments update their M&E frameworks to incorporate citizen-based monitoring. But taking a regulatory / compliance oriented approach to implementing this requirement would likely result in an over-emphasis on data collection mechanisms such as citizen surveys and citizen score cards with continued weak internalization and use of the information from these mechanisms to inform improvements.

To manage this risk, the framework promotes the mainstreaming of CBM practices into the business processes of government (DPME, 2013, p. 20) and the DPME Support Programme for Strengthening Citizen-Government Monitoring Partnerships promotes a four part model that gives equal emphasis to monitoring, analysis, action and feedback to citizens.

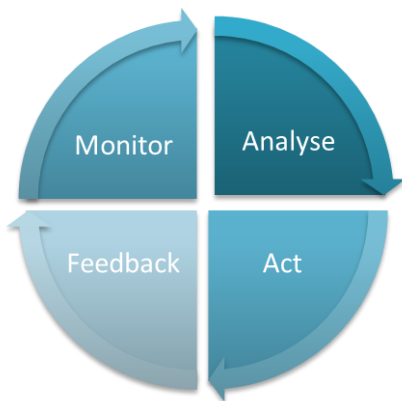


Figure 1. The four stage CBM model

Piloting Citizen-Based Monitoring

DPME's support for the uptake of citizen-based monitoring has three focuses: (i) a pilot that will run until March 2015; (ii) a learning and technical support programme focused on support to government to implement the principles and requirements of the framework; and (iii) a policy process that will see a policy recommendations report submitted to Cabinet in 2015. The pilot – which will inform the broader support and learning programme and the policy process – will focus on testing approaches to implementing the four stage citizen-based monitoring model. DPME will partner with three key service delivery departments in the pilot.

These departments are:

- The South African Police Services
- The Department of Health
- The Department of Social Development (including the South African Social Security Agency)

These three departments made formal commitments in 2012 to partner DPME in this pilot, and discussions with senior officials of these departments have shaped the planning.

The pilot aims to lay the foundations for a citizen-based monitoring system, built on facility-level monitoring partnerships that will support the vision of active citizens and a capable and developmental state, as envisaged in the National Development Plan.

The pilot will test an assumption that if opportunities are created for citizens to routinely give input on services, and platforms for engagement on this data with responsible officials are created, this will drive on-going improvements to how services are delivered. This will also contribute to the emergence of constructive partnerships between citizens, civil society and government. It is also assumed that evidence-based feedback from the frontline will support the unblocking of problems higher up in the value chain.

The pilot is supported by a grant from the British government's Department for International Development (DFID) through the Strengthening Performance Monitoring and Evaluation for the Poor in South Africa.

Methodology

The pilot will follow an action research approach to test various citizen-based monitoring tools and interventions at police stations, health facilities, social grant and welfare service sites in ten pilot sites around South Africa. This testing is aimed at developing simple, affordable and scalable approaches that can be rolled out to other facilities following piloting. It is aimed that the pilot will move to scale in 2015.

The model

These tools and interventions, which will include a mix of independent surveys, on-going micro-surveys and unsolicited feedback, will focus on the model described in the framework. This model sets out four focus areas for citizen-based monitoring, namely: monitoring service delivery, analyzing the monitoring findings, taking action based on this analysis; and then feeding back / communicating the findings, analysis and actions to citizens and government officials at a given facility. The aim is to establish a "perpetual data" flow "to allow citizens and managers to triangulate citizen experience / perception with other self-reported performance data (like number of rape cases followed up etc.) in a way that will expose [or refute] abuses of self-reporting that are said to be rife among public service bodies". (Seriti Institute, 2013, p. 9)

Participatory approach

The pilot will emphasize a participatory and learning approach at all levels of the project. At the project oversight level, the pilot will be guided by three sector steering committees. These committees shape the pilot from sector perspectives (policing, health and social development). At a pilot site level, the design and implementation of interventions will be shaped by engagement with citizens and frontline officials, to enable local solutions to emerge. DPME has assembled a technical support team comprising of experienced community development, training, research and community-based M&E specialists. This team includes the Seriti Institute, which pioneered the Community Works Programme with The Presidency, as well as expertise from Keystone Accountability and the Centre for Democratizing Information.

Site selection

The ten pilot sites are being selected using a set of criteria developed in consultation with the sector steering committees. The sites will include facilities from all three participating sectors, most likely at ward or sub-ward level. The final site selection will represent a best fit for the requirements of each of the sectors and DPME. The following broad criteria currently obtain:

1. Poor communities
2. Presidential priority sites
3. Ministry of Social Development priority sites
4. SASSA improvement sites
5. National Health Insurance pilot sites
6. Urban/rural sites
7. Formal and informal settlements
8. Priority mining communities

Learning platforms

At each layer of the project learning platforms will be created as well as opportunities for intersection between the layers. This will require the creation of learning spaces at each facility participating in the pilot, at a site level and at a sector level. The sector steering committees described above will be one type of learning platform, with each committee meeting eight times during the life of the pilot. Two large conferences or workshops will be held to bring actors from the pilot sites, the steering

committees and other stakeholders together to share information and insights. In addition case studies, guides and other publications will be produced to make the learning more widely available.

Concluding remarks

With approval of the framework, the SA Government has, at the highest level, committed itself to measuring its performance through the experiences of citizens. This commitment is informed by the understanding that strengthening citizen-based monitoring is not an event, but a continuous, iterative process – one that will require willingness to experiment and a commitment to seeking solutions within the reality of constraints.

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