

Moving away from top-down delivery state to active citizenship

QUIETLY, in Phuthaditjhaba in the Free State and in Tugela Ferry in KwaZulu-Natal, fascinating pilot projects, unnoticed in the national media, have been under way for some months. Others have now also been started in Burgersfort, Jouberton and Temba in Limpopo, North West and Gauteng. The projects are testing the idea of citizen-based monitoring of government's front-line services.

Local police stations, clinics and social grant facilities have been prioritised. Already there are encouraging, sometimes surprising, results. One of the major shortcomings of the past two decades has been the tendency for the state to be thought of (and to think of itself) as a top-down "delivery" state. This has had all kinds of negative consequences.

LEFT
TURN

Jeremy Cronin



Citizens are turned into self-righteous "beneficiaries", "recipients", "clients", "customers" of a wheelbarrow government offloading deliverables.

The government must certainly be held accountable for the deployment of public resources. But top-down delivery fosters a sense of entitlement within communities, rather than collective responsibility. When the government's significant (if uneven) redistributive effort is overwhelmed by the scale of problems, or falls behind rising

and often legitimate expectations, so popular, anger turns on the government and official demotivation sets in.

The wheelbarrow approach also undermines the potential for cohesion in poor communities. Many "township delivery protests" are fuelled by factional rivalries over who is to be prioritised on the delivery waiting list. Active citizenship is potentially our best weapon for overcoming inherent state bureaucratic tendencies – silos, officiousness, technocratic indifference and, above all, corruption.

Here is where citizen-based monitoring, piloted by the national Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation, has important potential. In Phuthaditjhaba and Tugela Ferry, teams of about 40 community members, participants in

the community work programme (CWP), were provided basic training in conducting surveys.

At a social grant payout point in Phuthaditjhaba, for instance, respondents were asked questions such as: "How did you reach the pay point?" (58 percent walked, 36 percent used taxis); "What was the cost of getting here?"; "How long did you wait in the queue?" (57 percent said less than 30 minutes and 25 percent said less than an hour); "What was your experience at the pay point?"; "Did you know what documents to bring?"; "Did you feel safe?" (94 percent said yes); "Were you asked for a bribe?" (alarmingly, 7 percent said yes). Of the 12 percent who had money deducted, 80 percent said they didn't understand why.

Meanwhile, front-line officials in clinics, police stations and social grant facilities were also interviewed. Then came the most important part – turning information into change.

Dialogue between staff and community groups was organised. For the first time, community members felt they had a relevant voice. Local solutions were often found, with a shared sense of responsibility and initiative emerging.

The CWP participants will continue to monitor front-line services, including the agreed changes in their localities. These are still small steps. But it's an approach that surely needs to be rapidly expanded.

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