Necessity Of Social Accountability In South Africa

Social Accountability

Social accountability is primarily about two key stakeholders, that's citizens and the government. As a concept it started in South-East Asia where it looked at a way to improve the relationship between citizens and the government. One of the approaches that was looked at by development workers in the south-east region was this concept of social accountability.

What it is, is a set of actions that a citizen or a group of citizens can use hold public officials to account. It specifically looks at their conduct and their performance, whether a single official or a particular department or larger government institution. The three things that we'll focus on here is, a focus on service delivery, an improvement of people's welfare and improving people's rights.

So social accountability becomes very appropriate when you start looking at a country like South Africa and you see the level or number of disgruntled citizens that we have in the country. And as tool social accountability can at least help us understand better what the reasons for those problems are and obviously also look at ways in which you can go about finding solutions for them.

Social accountability can also be considered a non-traditional approach to citizen action, your more traditional actions would be your elections where here in South African you have your government elections every five years – your national and provincial elections every five years – and you've got your municipal elections taking place every five years – but the fifth year following the election of the provincial and national elections. They do not happen simultaneously. We've just come out of a national government election in 2019 May,8 and the next local government elections will be taking place in 2021, so there is a fairly short gap between the two.

That is usually the most common way that citizens do participate in the democratic system and your other one of course is your demonstrations and strikes, going out into the streets and marching. And so here with social accountability we wanted to look at different ways of being able to engage with the government other than those two. Fundamentally both the traditional and the non-traditional approaches are the same in that its about gathering information – gathering evidence – for the cause. Looking at that information, its authenticity and its accuracy and so on.

Then of course the intention with it is to use it to specifically improve the welfare in many of the communities and to improve the quality of electricity that households have access too – especially low-income households. Social accountability does not exclude protests and demonstrations as an action as it is a very critical action, however as stated its just about us looking at different way in which we can engage with government and then of course to look at the ethicacy of all the different approaches that we take.

Interestingly in South Africa now the time seems most appropriate for such an activity because

when you look at what has happened for instance in the electricity, in 1994 after the tern of the new dispensation there was a very significant drive to electrify households and we had somewhere about 2million – 3million connections which happened between 1990 and 2002 with new electric connections, which meant new people were being electrified for the very first time. The pace has decreased since then but we have still increased.

However now we're looking at a situation we're the electrical grid is no longer the most viable way for people to receive electricity to the home. This is because of reasons such as the 2008 economic crash, the load-shedding and more recently the status of the national utility at the moment. All of these factors are demonstrating to us the failure of market forces to be able to address these issues adequately.

Now, renewable energy, particularly Solar and Wind have been introduced into the South African market as our best alternatives for renewable energy. However we you look at the capital cost of solar pv for your home, it doesn't allow low-income households to utilize the technology for their homes to offset how much they are presently using for electricity.

And so, I think its fair to say then that market forces – in this particular instance – have yet been able to demonstrate a success for particularly low-income households when it comes to the providing electricity for families. If a household can move totally off grid then definitely but I think at this moment where we're just talking about lighting systems – yes it's a start and we cant take away the humble beginnings of it all – however presently households can not afford electricity and solar as a means of technology has the means to provide free electricity to many of these households.

There are four key pillars of social accountability. Firstly, that there are organized and capable citizens. Secondly, it's important to create an enabling environment with government officials who are willing to participate in the process. Thirdly, a cultural appropriateness and lastly access to information is also critical because as I've said before, if we are going to be gathering information and evidence it is important to then have access to information as the more information you have the stronger ones case and the stronger ones argument.

When we looked at our program, The rise to power 2.0, through the activity we know for a fact that there are organized and capable citizens however we did ensure to put out a call to the network that we are in that anyone we was willing or wanting to participate must have experience in having engaged with government before whether that's local government, provincial government or national government and then as well as they must belong to a community based organization. That is just an example of how we've met all of these pillars and the relationship there are between the four of them.

In terms of cultural appropriateness, if we understand cultural appropriateness in a sense today that it seems as if the number of service delivery protests taking place in South Africa at the moment. There is a culture that is present there that we may not consider as a culture, but I believe it is a culture when you look at the types of behavior the people take on during the service delivery protests. The steady increase in violence and destruction of property in almost lawlessness in the strikes indicate a particular type of culture when it comes to the service delivery protests.

It would be unfair to just want to put it onto citizens and their disgruntled-ness, we also

understand that protests often times happen in reaction to an action which was not recognized earlier. In many instances many people have said that government is just unwilling to engage with them, especially when it comes to protests. Most times the protests have to become violent or very destructive for senior officials to be able to come out. Yet when you look a little further into the situations you find that citizens have been calling for a long time for a senior official to come out and give the answers that are necessary, which doesn't always happen all that often.

So it becomes inappropriate I believe to say at a time where when having a demonstration or a large – dare I say – destructive demonstration, it becomes appropriate to then want to look at the other tools of social accountability. Where often times I've heard officials say that they feel unsafe to go out and engage with communities and so therefore they don't go out. Utilizing some of these tools one can provide a safe environment for these officials to engage.

And so at a time where there is such disgruntlement in the country and in communities, I think its appropriate for us to find other ways to engage and get our voices heard because the way that we've been doing things in the past have no longer been proving to be successful and if anything is causing more and more frustrations because tings are only looking to be getting worse and there seems to be no solutions present coming forth.

In terms of the relationship between government and citizens all of this work is to improve the relationship between the two and particularly in our case its poor citizens or those living in a low-income households and communities across the South African landscape, One of the things that is a key pillar of democracy is public participation and with social accountability and all of its tools are merely to improve the way in which the public participates because of course your middle to higher income households don't have quite the same challenges when it comes to engaging in and with the democratic system as do your lower income households.

And so in recognition in this as we all do its important then that the state or government or specific institution creates an enabling environment – needs to be willing to create that enabling environment- for that public participation to take place. As public participation is a key tool for citizens to engage in democracy and it happens at different levels. Its very important that the state demonstrates this willingness to want to participate with citizens by ensuring that there is an environment created.

The two best ways to improve any relationship is through trust and transparency or openness and in this sense the trust from both stake holders – government and citizens- and both the government and citizens for the trust to be able to exist, there needs to be credible champions from both these stakeholders willing to bond and participate in such processes .

And the only way in which the exercise truly successful is when there is transparency and within the safe environment – there needs to be transparency because no relationship has ever been successfully build on lies and if we are saying that we want to build a successful relationship, one has to be willing to open up and the other has to be willing to receive that information. If those things don't exist then the relationship becomes frail and then it becomes important to then manage expectations.

Often times when government puts out a call for a public hearing, my experience has been that many people from low-income households use this opportunity to air out their views and often times they use the incorrect platform to air out these views and therefore the entire process is

destroyed for those reasons. Its not always the case but it happens often enough that government then becomes reluctant to have very large and open meetings because as stated on their side often times people get expectations as soon as they hear that there is a hearing come out.

This is perhaps human error that we have these expectations, however, people always have expectations. What's important is not whether or not they have them but rather how do you then manage their expectations that they have. So it becomes important then that the two stakeholders sit down together and discuss what the success that they are trying to work towards looks like and what does the failure of what it is we are trying to work towards look like. Because then if and when we work on that image together, when we have a shared understanding of what that end goal will look like then we know what to do and what actions will take us there and what actions will not take us there.

So managing expectations becomes extremely critical, it also helps one understand what to do when unexpected things take place. It is so important to be able to manage expectations and often times to little importance is placed on the managing of people's expectations, and we often blow out when expectations are not met. Yet there is not time that we've taken to understand one another's expectations and the better we manage each other's expectations the better we manage each other's disappointment.

So this is the reason for us why social accountability was keyed in this project. For us to be able to say that if we need communities to engage at a policy level, we understand that they have already tried to participate and engage with government at different levels and often times not finding success. And so a lot of people were disgruntled and no longer interested to engage and had all but given up. So it offers up a different set of tools to be able to understand how it is we can hold government officials to account. How can we? What other ways we can go about doing so ?

Just some of the actions that were covered and which form part of social accountability that we've covered in a project include participatory budgeting. In our case we looked at and asked our participants to directly engage in the meetings and to understand wat is happening at IDP meetings in their different communities; they don't have to ask questions at this stage however know that the platform does exist to ask some questions. But just to understand how is it the budget is built together. What is it that happens in this process? What is the allocation that has been made to that specific cause or to electricity – in many instances for at least our project.

To also understand what is governments priority visa v the other challenges in our communities that we face – the more day to day type challenges that we struggle within many communities around the country.

Another one is public expenditure tracking and this looks at certain line items within the budget and to see over months how the state has managed that expenditure. This is also a very great tool when you are looking at a very specific service, for instance in our case we are looking at electricity. Information about electricity because of the current situation where the national utility is in dire states. There is information about it, we are looking at the spending patterns of ESKOM as relates to the electricity generation and also what are the possibilities therein that we could get an increase in free budget allocation or at least how much the municipalities and the state paying at the moment for their free basic allocation that is provided to all low income

households or indigent households.

Citizen monitoring is another tool where communities can go out and they can develop a set of metrics and then use those metrics to measure the quality of service dependent on what it is they were looking for. In our case we developed a community score card – for the community of Nyanga- where it looked at electricity related matters and then the community also developed the metrics and then the City developed the metrics. Then both of the parties came together to have a look at it and to understand one another's perceptions of the quality of service that they've received, and then it created an environment for them to engage on how that situation could groove.

Something that we also wanted to focus strongly is enhancing citizen knowledge specifically about processes we often find that in many of our participants that they do not know where to go when the power cuts or when they have got a certain issue with the electricity, for instance why my free basic allocation suddenly dropped or was dropped from one month to the next with no explanation.

There are answers to these questions and we have workshopped our participants on what these answers are and what we've seen is that many of the participants share with us stories about how they had helped people in their communities to get answers or for work to improve or where projects had stalled for work to continue, just on the knowledge. Another thing on knowledge is that we also had experiences of people saying that power had cut from their homes for an extended period of time and because they did not know where to go to report the problem or that they had reported it serval times but were not getting any assistance. And so, it was only after they had spent some time and money to make their way to Town to only get directed to a place that is closer to their community, that they got help.

And so this person who lived in Nyanga sat at home without electricity for a week, yet when they finally fixed it they said that the problem could have been fixed in a matter of days and it wasn't something big that was wrong. But because she didn't know what to do or where to go and who to contact she was without power for all of these other days.

Social accountability also takes into account your more conventional accountability mechanisms, like your public education. In the program we are going to have a workshop with the public participation department of the Western Cape provincial legislator. Speaking about the petitions and submissions and other ways in which we can engage with the public participation mechanism and its important that if it means in order to address the challenges in many of these communities is a policy intervention then the best place to get information is often times at public meeting or public hearings, where community leaders often times don't have an opportunity to attend.

So, for us it was a question of how we can get these community leaders and participants into these spaces and hearings; so that they can ask some of the questions that they need answered so that they can hear how things are conducted at a parliament level or a provincial level or even a council level. Where their voices have been requested that they're there to make their voices heard. Such as in the IRP hearing and the NERSA hearings at the beginning of 2019.

There are many of these platforms that government is currently utilizing but they are just difficult

for community leaders to get to because of financial reasons largely. And so one thing social accountability does say is that – and I guess this is where the roles of agents and organizations such as Project 90by2030 play a role to provide some support, to many of these community leaders to participate in the decision making of their communities.

And so this is the reason why we chose and opted for social accountability to be the core as there are a great deal of tools that the communities will be able to use. There is this desire that we had to want to look at different approaches to engage with the state outside of your traditional ways and this is exactly what we got trough social accountability. When baring one or two challenges it works. There are things I guess that are in someone’s control and things that are not necessarily in our control. But as a tool it is proven to work.