E-governance as an innovative participation democracy strategy: the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA)

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Abstract:

E-governance needs to be located in the international citizen participation and democracy debate. The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) states that participation strategies require to; inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower the citizenry. However, depending on the selection of strategies, ideally speaking citizens should rather be capacitated to *influence*, *direct*, *control* and *own* local development spaces. Citizens must be recognised on matters that affect them and through their participation should enter into partnerships which results in co-production of local governance programmes and projects which impact on them. The question is: can e-governance enable the above?

E-governance acts as an innovative strategy to create spaces for good governance and civil society engagement based on co-production principles. Through e-governance as a participatory democracy strategy, empowering co-produced partnerships between the State and its citizenry can be established to address governance deficits. The *invited* State participatory policy-and strategy frameworks in South Africa struggle to empower an often disillusioned citizenry. In combination with other participation strategies, e-government acts as an additional strategy to engage the State-citizen divide in an effective and accessible manner.

E-government must be *accessible, interactive, transactional* and *transformational*, and services offered electronically should not be seen as new but rather as additional strategies to save time, convenience, cost reduction and equitable distribution of services. The lack of grassroots and context-specific participation strategies, relevant to local users' capacity to participate remains a challenge. E-government must take into account the needs of the society, the developmental

goals of the State and the empowerment of its citizens. We need to ask: when; for whom, will we use e-governance services and why? Many developing countries in implementing e-governance are faced with social realities of poverty; language divides; illiteracy; inequality and unemployment amongst others.

This paper focusses on a development strategy introduced by the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA), wherein an electronic payment system is implemented to pay all social grant recipients. This initiative aimed at reducing fraud and corruption, improving accountability and transparency, has strengthened constitutional democracy through financial and material inclusion. The e-governance strategy employed by SASSA becomes a continuous optimisation of government service delivery, constituency participation and good governance by transforming internal and external relationships. The rights of the poor and the vulnerable are protected and this initiative is commended by the South African Reserve Bank.

The strategy implemented by SASSA has opportunities and challenges for both citizens and the State in a society that experiences a digital divide. Communicating development processes and goals should become a primary objective of any institution. An appropriate citizen participation strategy at a level of citizen power whose consequence will be an improved service delivery free from complaints and protestations is ideal for South Africa.

Introduction

Governments in both developed and developing countries are embarking on e-government. This innovative governance contributes towards improving service delivery, access to information and enhances transparency. In addition, e-governance creates space for public participation, good governance and thus enhances democracy (UNESDOC, 2005; Nzimakwe, 2012:56-68; Couttolemc, 2012). This phenomenon has a significant impact on how government conducts its business, and how it interacts within itself, with the private sector and the public in general. E-governance has changed the nature of the relationship between government and the public into a technological-based relationship. Most importantly, e-government calls for communication of development processes and goals in an effective and accessible manner, taking into account the needs of society,

developmental goals of government and empowerment of the public (Van Dijk & Croucamp, 2007: 670).

E-government supposedly increases the level of public participation as supported by the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation Toolkit (2007) which states that participation *informs*, *consults*, *involves*, *collaborates* and *empowers* (Theron & Mchunu, 2014: 111-128). Empowering participation, for example, enables beneficiaries to *influence*, *direct*, *control* and *own* the development introduced on their behave (Creighton, 2005:139-179). This issue of authentic and empowering public participation has been highlighted by several scholars, who emphasise the right of the citizenry to be heard (Burkey, 2002; Creighton, 2005; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007).

The e-government strategy is one of the public participation strategies that have to be implemented in a manner that promotes community development (Swanepoel & De Beer, 2011: 75-83). For Kotze (1997:37) a public participation approach has to be people-centred, wherein development, communication, influence and dialogue all take place in the public domain. In this regard the international debate recognises that democracy is deepened through public participation (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007).

Following the above, Gwala (2011:2) states public participation strategies must be relevant to local users' capacity to participate in it, the strategy must appreciate the local meaning-giving context in which development takes place (Kotze & Kotze, 2008: 76-99). Here, the contextual and personal ability of users to use the electronic payment system is of significance to strategic planning and management, which begs the questions: *when*, and *for whom*, will we use e-governance services and *why*?

This paper focuses on a developmental strategy introduced by the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA), wherein an electronic payment system is implemented to pay all social grants recipients. According to the SASSA (2012:2), the aim is to reduce social grant fraud, eliminate duplications and to improve accountability and transparency within South Africa's social assistance system. For Manyathi (2011:35) e-governance can create an opportunity for improved audit reports as well as savings of policy costs, which can be redirected through the National Treasury for other pro bono uses.

Heginbotham (2006:2) points out that e-government is supposed to take into account the needs of society, the developmental goals of government, and the empowerment of its citizens. Communicating development processes and goals should therefore become a primary objective of any institution as this issue – communication – locates the SASSA model and approach within the participation debate, internationally and locally (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Hickey & Mohan, 2004; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Theron & Mchunu, 2014). If authentic participation leads to empowered citizens, the question begs: does the SASSA model and approach generate authentic and empowering spaces for its participants in South Africa?

The SASSA has utilised a top-down approach in its implementation of the electronic payment system and has not considered authentic public participation in the process. Theron & Ceasar (2008: 100-123) and Theron & Mchunu (2014: 111-128) argues that this top-down approach is rigid, prescriptive and smacks of arrogance as it imposes a certain type of knowledge transfer and communication style upon its "beneficiaries". In the above regard, Davids (2014: 18-19) mentions that *authentic* and *empowering* public participation includes the public in the processes of decision-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, as well as the sharing of the benefits of governance and development, including outputs and outcomes. Quebral (1998), in Heginbotham (2006:2) argues that public participation, "… is the art and science of human communication applied to the speedy transformation of a country and the mass of its people from poverty to a dynamic state of economic growth that makes possible greater social equality and the larger fulfilment of the human potential".

In South Africa, e-governance services are impeded by several issues, such as a lack of technically skilled people, limited financial resources, poor energy resources, inefficient research and development of ICT infrastructure, the presence of eleven official languages, a high level of illiteracy and the high costs of internet access and ICT equipment (Lesame, 2005:197-198). These impediments call for co-production and capacity-building using an appropriate mix of strategy. In this regard, cooperative governance consolidates democracy and ensures effective, ethical and "good" governance.

Participatory democracy

Heywood (2007:17) describes participatory democracy as a form of democracy that allows the public to participate in the decision-making process of policy development, formulation and implementation. According to Roelofs (1998:25), the definitions of participatory democracy often touch on two interlinked notions: *participation* and *action*, and where these two are manifested participatory democracy may be expected to feature. For Theron & Mchunu (2014:111-128) the rationale behind the promotion of public participation is the belief that when the public participate in their *own* development, that "intervention" is perceived to be legitimate and it is more likely to be sustained.

Cornwall & Coelho (2007) argue that democracy spaces are consolidated when the public is empowered to take control of local decision-making processes (Gildenhuys, Fox & Wissink, 1991:124). Heywood (2007:72) states that when the public does not participate in decision-making, democracy translates into being a "*hurrah* word", a "feel good" approach, something like just "ticking the compliance box" for those who are tasked to facilitate it. He argues that, even though democracy is almost universally regarded as a "good thing", when the interests of a particular organisation and/or certain individuals are served under the umbrella of democracy whilst the needs of the public are not, this cannot be regarded as democracy, neither "good governance".

Following the people-centred approach, Burkey (2002:35) argues that authentic development must begin with, and within, an individual and unless motivation comes from within, efforts to promote change will not be sustained by that individual. In essence, manipulative approaches and the era of dictatorship need to be replaced by *authentic* and *empowering* participatory approaches through which the public can *influence, direct, control* and *own* development. In this regard, Hickey and Mohan (2004:8) argue that when the public is afforded space to participate it does not only influence the development "intervention", but it will take ownership and direct the development agenda based on its context specifics. Swanepoel & De Beer (2011:46) state that people become more self-reliant and self-sufficient if they participate in decision-making and their dignity is restored, thus an institutional building process is achieved. The ANC (2002:1) agrees and mentions that, "… where people are not

involved in the decisions that affect their lives, social policies and political interventions are less likely to succeed. Participatory democracy should therefore complement and enhance representative democracy".

Following the above principles, Davids (2014: 49-61) states that when participatory democracy is practised it empowers the public to be drivers of their own development and policy-making processes, meaning that participatory democracy is determined by the extent to which the State has created appropriate *invited* spaces for public participation (Kotze & Kotze, 2008: 91). It is argued by Mchunu & Theron (2013) that when these invited spaces fail, the (frustrated/disillusioned) public often *invent* their own spaces via the protest route.

The ideal type of participation envisaged in a participatory democracy is ongoing interaction between the elected and the public in all decision-making and is seen as contributing to the enhancement of democracy in a society. CIVICUS (2006:4) concludes that participatory governance is about empowering the public to influence and share control in processes of public decision-making that affect their lives. If participatory democracy is implemented correctly, it can be a tool that both the government and the public can use to entrench empowering public participation, thus consolidating democracy. Here, participatory democracy serves as a basis for good governance, as democratic governance emanates from good governance (Gwala, 2011; Mchunu & Theron, 2014).

Good governance

For PALAMA (2009:114) good governance is the integrated management of political, socio-economical and institutional relationships between people, policy, and power for decision-making about the distribution of development or public resources. Good governance is fundamentally concerned with relationships between people as individuals, interested groups, stakeholders and organisations. These relationships are forged in order to improve services, and to ensure that services are delivered and benefits enjoyed. This is in line with the principles of a "better life for all", people-centred development and public participation. If the public is allowed scope to *influence, direct* and *own* decisions made for its own development, then accountability becomes a shared responsibility and good governance is achieved

(Mchunu, 2012:60) in that good governance is the highest need for authentic management and development of public affairs.

Chapter 10, Section 195 of the Constitution (1996) lists values of good governance, such as how public servants must conduct themselves, namely in terms of representation, professional ethics, efficiency and effectiveness, accountability, impartiality, development orientation, representativeness and participation, and fairness. The latter also dovetails the Batho Pele - principles as per the White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery (RSA, 1997).

PALAMA (2009:125) tabulates six guidelines for good governance in the public sector:

(i) There must be established criteria to measure performance of public officials; this also extends to monitoring and evaluating expenditure programmes.

(ii) Citizens must be empowered to understand and know what is taking place in the public service. The public will then also be able to demand improvements in the services rendered.

(iii) Capacity must be built in public financial management with the view to account to the tax-payers on the revue of government.

(iv) Measures that prevent transparency need to be removed, if the general public does not know what is taking place in government, government cannot expect the public to support its work and initiatives.

(v) Participation in government by the general public needs to be enabled. Practical ways of ensuring participation must be explored, as in a democratic country people must participate in policy formulation.

(vi) Cooperation with other institutions in civil society, such as NGOs, CBOs and FBOs, is of importance, as such institutions create a platform for dialogue. Additionally, civil society raises the issues of vulnerable or marginalised groups.

It becomes evident, based on the above, that should countries apply these principles, criticisms would be minimalised. Kotzé & Kotzé (2008:91) mention that a State that adopts and promotes good governance creates an enabling environment for the public to participate meaningfully in its affairs, thus good governance creates an empowering environment for participatory democracy.

Today public participation is increasingly considered standard practice and is regarded as an essential characteristic of, and condition for, a successful modern democracy and good governance in which the manipulative participatory approaches are replaced by *authentic* and *empowering* participation (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Hickey & Mohan, 2005; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007). As identified by Rahman (1993:150) in Theron & Mchunu (2014:114), the key issue of public participation is that it is an organised activity (collective) of the people concerned, who *own* the philosophy and *direct* their collective ideas, as well as *control* the process of action, and whose needs lie at the heart of their *own*, local development. Siphuma (2009:20) states that what constitutes authentic and empowering public participation is a collective effort by the public to pool their efforts and resources for the attainment of its own *goal*.

Public participation models

Public participation demands deliberate and focussed action towards moving away from an unsatisfactory current situation towards a more desirable situation (De Beer & Swanepoel, 1998:20). This can be presented as a continuum that covers four modes that overlap. Table 1 below contains Pretty, *et al.*'s seven typologies and Oakley & Marsden's (1984) four modes of public participation:

Table 1: The seven typologies and four modes of public participation

TYPOLOGIES	MODES
1. Passive participation: The public is merely told what is to happen from the top (authority), leaving them clueless, frustrated and powerless.	**1. Anti-participatory mode:** Voluntary contribution from the public in a programme/project is afforded, but the public is not expected to shape programme/project content or outcomes.
2. Participation in information giving:	**2. Manipulation mode:** "Involvement" in

The public is made to answer questions and are not afforded the opportunity to influence or direct proceedings. Findings are neither shared nor validated.	decision-making, programme/project implementation, evaluation and sharing in the benefits are all included on paper in public participation, but without direct benefits to the public.
3. Participation by consultation: The public is "consulted" by professionals who have already defined both the problem and solution, and are not under obligation to modify their position based on public contributions.	**3. Incremental mode:** Concerned with organised efforts to increase control over resources and regulative institutions in a given social situation.
4. Participation for material incentive: Participation by providing resources in return for food or cash, e.g. farmers providing fields but not being "involved" in the learning and empowering process.	**4. Authentic public participation:** Public participates fully, influences the direction, executes the programme/project, enhances its well-being in a situation where self-reliance is cherished.
5. Functional participation: The public participates in a group context to meet predetermined objectives.	
6. Interactive participation: Joint analysis and participation, which is viewed as a right, not a means of achieving programme/project goals.	
7. Self-mobilisation: Public takes initiative on its own, identifies areas of support, mobilises resources and controls them. Yet such a bottom-up approach may not challenge the existing inequitable distribution of wealth and power.	

Source: Theron & Mchunu (2014: 114-117).

In addition to the above typologies and modes, Arnstein (1969:218), a known expert on public participation models, argues that "public participation can differ in scope and depth". She formulated eight possible levels of public participation which indicate the extent of public participation in a "participation ladder". The ladder moves from manipulation (level 8) to public control (level 1) (Theron & Mchunu, 2014: 117). Table 2 below contains comparisons of the typologies, modes and levels of public participation. The purpose of this exercise is to demonstrate the overlaps between the seven typologies and the four modes, and at what level public participation is located using the participation ladder.

Table 2: Comparison of typologies, modes and levels of public participation

MODE	TYPOLOGY	LEVELS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION	LEVEL NO.
1. Anti-participatory mode	Passive participation	Manipulative	8
2. Manipulation mode	Functional participation	Placation	4
		Consultation	5
		Informing	6
	Participation in information giving	Therapy	7
3. Incremental mode	Interactive participation	Delegated power	2
4. Authentic public participation	Self-mobilisation	Public control	1
		Partnership	3

Source: Qina (2014:39).

In the above regard, public participation must be viewed as a means of empowering the public, and developing their skills and abilities in terms of their own developmental needs and priorities. In a situation where the public span of control is minimal, the public is deprived of its right to be heard and this may lead to complaints and even protests (Burger, 2009:2; Mchunu & Theron, 2013). The ideal situation is therefore when the public is able to *influence*, *direct*, *control* and *own* the decision-making and development process meant for it.

Locating e-governance in the public participation debate

Cloete & Schwella (2006:538) argue that information technology (IT) is a management tool with the same function as files, typewriters, ballpoint pens, and so forth; however with IT these tools are more sophisticated and are automated to reach objectives and outcomes more effectively. Digital technology presents new opportunities for both public and private sectors. The World Bank Commission on Growth and Development Report, in Roux (2011:201) attests to this and states that the economic success of East Asian countries was made possible by exploiting global markets using digital technology. The Economic Intelligence Unit (2009:6) goes further, mentioning that the digital economy is decisively connected to the real economy. Cloete & Schwella (2006:539) state that with ICT government functions are transformed internally into e-management and externally into e-delivery.

The National Development Plan of South Africa (2011:17) states that the infrastructure of a country is not about brick and mortar, but about people, systems, plans, designs, and the maintenance and operation of complicated systems over a period of time. However, a key question relates to the ability of ordinary people to access ICT, as in the case of the SASSA electronic payment system. In addition, Lesame (2005:193) argues that not only should e-governance be relevant to customers, but also it should be equally accessible to all users, including customers, for the betterment of government service delivery.

The Department of Public Service and Administration (2001a:7) impresses upon all State organs that should a desire to implement ICT be expressed, the point of departure is the identification of customers' needs and abilities, followed by a determination of how ICT will effectively and efficiently assist the achievement of these intended objectives. These are basic principles applicable to all government entities including the SASSA. The DPSA (2007), emphasises the importance of *authentic* and *empowering* public participation prior to the implementation of e-governance, wherein the public is enabled to *influence, direct, control* and ultimately *own* the developmental "intervention". E-government potentially empowers individual citizens by providing them with an alternative channel to access information and services, and to interact with government.

Implementation of an electronic payment system by the SASSA: A case study in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa

The SASSA in February 2012, announced its strategic approach to re-register all social grants recipients biometrically and to pay them electronically (SASSA, 2012:1). According to the SASSA, the aim of this biometric re-registration, amongst others, is to reduce fraud and corruption within the social grants system, eliminate duplications, create a credible data base, and enhance accountability and transparency. However, South Africa experiences a digital divide whereby the affluent urban communities have improved access to communication technologies whilst the rural communities' former homelands lag behind. Equity has to be maintained at all times and, for this to be realised, equal opportunities should be promoted for the "have not's".

The research conducted by one of the authors of this paper found that:

1. The SASSA's approach to the implementation of the electronic payment system was a top-down approach wherein the public were not afforded the opportunity to be heard. The social grants beneficiaries (affected party) were "pushed" to accept the electronic payment system irrespective of their inability to utilise it. The authors argues that a top-down approach need to be dismantled and be replaced with authentic and empowering public participation wherein the public is afforded space to *influence, direct* and *own* their development.

2. The research further showed that the SASSA employees feel similarly to the beneficiaries as the SASSA managers expressed frustration caused by their inability to serve their clients (beneficiaries) with dignity and respect owing to limited knowledge and access to the electronic payment system solutions.

3. Social grants beneficiaries are exposed or made vulnerable to all sorts of criminal elements, and they are not cared for. The Bill of Rights in the Constitution (1996) states that this is a violation of first generation rights. The social grant beneficiaries need to be understood in their own context.

4. Even though the social grants beneficiaries appreciate their ability to access their monthly social grants anywhere in the country, the majority of the beneficiaries are not satisfied with the electronic payment system, the main causes being:

   (i) The inconvenience of having to pay for transport to get to access points in order to receive their monthly social grants.

   (ii) Their inability to utilise Automated Teller Machines (ATMs), which makes them vulnerable to criminals who target these access points during payment periods.

   (iii) The long queues that they are subjected to.

   (iv) Non-availability of the SASSA customer care personnel at ATMs.

   (v) Inability to receive prompt responses in relation to their queries.

5. The SASSA marketed the implementation of electronic payment only after the appointment of a service provider. The marketing itself was merely to ensure a "feel good" sense among beneficiaries, and has not afforded the public any space and scope to *influence, direct,* or *own* the initiative. The authors argues that public participation is not a privilege but a basic right that is fundamental for claiming other rights. Following Table 1 and 2 above, this case study locates the SASSA model as falling under typology 2 (participation by "informing" and mode 2 (manipulation) as beneficiaries are merely expected to comply with the programme as implemented and are to share receive benefits yet not able to evaluate its benefits. Yet the authors argue that a preferred mode is 4 (authentic public participation) falling under typology 4 (self-mobilisation) where the public *control* their development.

6. The study shows that a lack of knowledge or inability of beneficiaries to utilise the ATMs, or deductions, causes the SASSA call centre to be flooded with complaints from the populace of social grants. Some beneficiaries attributed this inability to access monthly social grants to illiteracy and unavailability of resources. The respondents stated that with a concerted effort for public participation, complaints could have been eliminated.

7. The SASSA did not conduct a feasibility study on the implementation of e-governance in order to assess whether its clients would be able to access their monthly social grants but merely put its administrative processes as a priority instead of clients' abilities to practically use the system. The authors argued that when development or e-governance is introduced we must ask for whom, when and why we are embarking on it. *Authentic* and *empowering* public participation would have enabled beneficiaries to participate meaningfully in this system.

Occurrences like these, where the decision-making process is not *authentic* and *empowering*, impact negatively on service delivery. If the public is allowed scope to *influence*, *direct, control* and *own* decisions made for its own development and welfare, then accountability becomes a shared responsibility. Public participation as both a means and an end in the process of development must be understood holistically and multi-dimensionally against the backdrop of different environments and dynamics of development and well as the impact of strategies considered for the process. In the case study the technical sophistication of the system, other practical challenges like the distance from and availability of service points did not match the ability of a large majority to operate it functionally.

An appropriate mix

The World Bank (1996b:9) warns that there is no existing perfect model for public participation. Chambers (2002) in Theron & Mchunu (2014:121-127) supports this, cautioning that, due to this lack of a strategic "blueprint", public participation strategy calls for the intensive training of change agents (Burkey, 1993:73-114). Theron & Mchunu (2014) further suggests that, to narrow the gap between rhetoric and reality, community stakeholders, as local experts, should be part of the process of planning and identifying appropriate public participation strategies. The case study shows that there has not been any training conducted by the SASSA to both beneficiaries and the staff before the implementation of electronic payment system.

As in the case of the SASSA, selection of strategy brings more questions than answers to the fore as it raises two issues that are at stake, namely *inclusivity* and *representativeness.* The SASSA only focusses on its "self-administrative matters" and little concern has been shown to beneficiaries. Friedman (1993:2) agrees and

states that when the level and inclusivity of these two essential elements are both highly questionable and cannot be adequately responded to, then a call must be made for each situation to have its own relevant combination of strategy since there is no best strategy available in the development market.

A possible solution to this problem of strategy, as Theron, Ceasar & Davids (2007:11) suggests, will be for public participation practitioners to adapt the 'IAP2 principles' and the 'spectrum' to apply to their development of public participation strategies and tools. The spectrum of public participation leads to different levels of influence of public impact on decision making. Gwala (2012:8) echoes this view, stating that public participation facilitators must always (first) assess the local context(s) before an "appropriate mix" of strategies can be decided upon. Appropriate strategies will ensure that the public is provided with the scope to *influence, direct, control* and even *own* development interventions and decision-making processes.

Effective and efficient application of public participation rests on an appropriate application of IAP2 (2007) core values and the Manilla Declaration (1989). These values need to be understood and applied in a spectrum of public participation that increases the level of participation. The application of an incremental spectrum of public participation culminates in an "appropriate mix" of strategy selected for a particular community as strategies of public participation vary from one community to another and one context to another.

The "golden rule" for appropriate public participation strategies is to select the best combination of strategy for the task at hand. Chambers (2002) agrees by stating that participation facilitators should consider the input which community stakeholders can offer regarding the most appropriate strategies, when, how and why, and harness the potential of community social networks, social capital and indigenous knowledge (Sillitoe, Dixon & Barr, 2006; Pottier, Bicker & Sillitoe, 2003).

True as this may be, at the SASSA strategy is still ineffective and therefore the public is denied the space and scope to *influence, direct, control* and *own* decision-making processes. The authors argue that development demands action from a community to improve its current situation from a less desirable to a more desirable one. The SASSA decision to implement electronic payment system had numerous benefits,

not only for the SASSA and its clients, but also for tax-payers and the nation in general. However, the SASSA strategy defeated these benefits only through its failure to implement authentic and empowering public participation and rather opting for a top-down approach.

Summary

This paper argued that e-governance can enable authentic and empowering public participation, if the social realities of poverty, language and the digital divide are considered. The rights of citizens to participate in their own development cannot be overlooked as seen in the SASSA case. The SASSA's strategy defeated its own benefits only through its failure to implement *authentic* and *empowering* public participation and rather opting for a top-down approach. The basic principle of public participation is for those in authority to genuinely listen to public inputs and to be open to possible influence by the public. In doing so the public will be able to *direct, influence, control* and *own* the development or electronic payment method offered to them, instead of being unwillingly made to use it. Citizens would like to live in a State where the government has an evident concern for and a commitment to fostering a "better life for all".

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