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Underground Voices: Community Articulation of needs through mobile technology in public participation

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Abstract: Public participation in government has gain in popularity among democratic countries. It seems to be the way to go to get to a sort of New Jerusalem where everyone is happy. However in South Africa for instance, despite the implementation of best practices and despite the introduction of ICTs to support and enhance that process (e-participation), it seems that there is still a problem because people seem to prefer violent expressions to peaceful exchanges. In this paper, we look at the use of technology which potential seems has not been understood and realised, towards helping the improvement of the process. The focus is on the first step: "community articulation of needs" and the use of mobile technology (sms) in consultation for a by law to be passed. Frameworks and models (UTAUT, TEF, S&CI) will be used to asses that initiative use of technology and to determine what help or hinder the process from that perspective. The design is qualitative, inductive and interpretivist. The methodology comprehends literature review, semi-structured interviews and focus groups deliberations. As discussion and conclusion, the paper question if the whole problem of e-participation is not just a matter of context.

Keywords: Public participation, e-Participation, Social capital, Unified Theory of acceptance and use of Technology (UTAUT), Technology Enactment Framework (FET), Social and community informatics

1. Introduction and background to the research problem

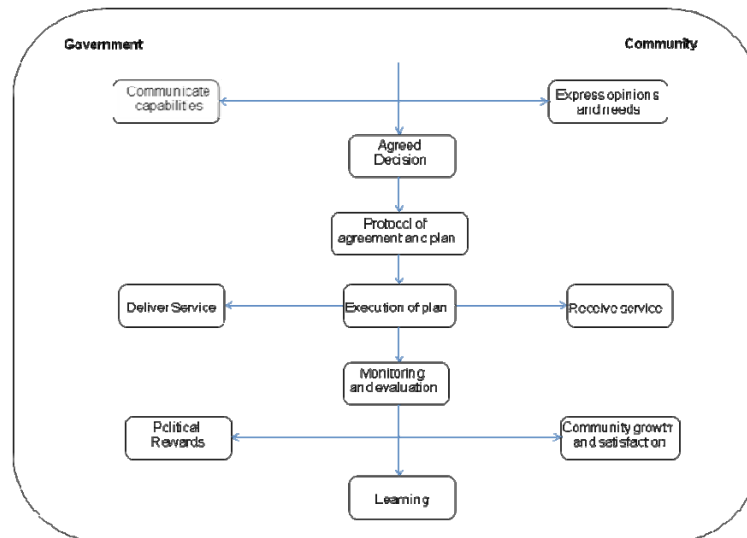
South Africa can be seen as one of the most advanced democracies on the African continent. Its 1996 constitution and state institutions were developed to enable a high level of public participation, and they suggest roles and functional mechanisms as well as independent bodies to look after each other's practices (Republic of South Africa 1996; SA Government 2010). The aim was to repair the errors of the past and to create a more just, equal, and peaceful country. The constitution lays out a scheme for a representative, deliberative and participative democracy. The legislature is predominant and public participation is expected, like the mortar that joins bricks together. As such, public participation is a very broad and complex process with an influence on all governmental levels, departments and activities; as well as an important number of interrelated stakeholders. Several authors such as Arnstein (1969), Habermas (1969), Macintosh (2004), Taylor and Bytheway (2006) and others have suggested frameworks and models of understanding, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of that process. However, basically it can be understood through the lenses of a demand dimension and a supply dimension (Thakur 2009), from the community and from the government viewpoints respectively. It can be therefore framed (Figure1) as an interaction where needs are expressed to a government possessing limited resources to deliver according to demands requirements after agreed decisions. It suggests that the parties would be partnering in monitoring and evaluating the process all along for satisfying improvements.

Between 1996 and 2000, several acts were promulgated modifying local government to fit to a model similar to exemplary international good practice, such as in the case of participatory budgeting in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre (SA Government 2007). For that purpose, numerous initiatives were launched, and the introduction of ICT-based systems was one of them. For instance, impressive governmental websites rich with information from all administrative departments and state institutions, like <http://www.capegateway.gov.za>, were developed and set up; call centres were deployed in order to collect complaints, congratulations and suggestions; Some departments like the Department of Home Affairs even now issue electronic receipts for transactions; it is possible to pay one's taxes online at the SARS (South African Revenue Service) website; in certain wards, sms (short message service) are used to send out calls for meetings for public hearings and so on. These investments were intended to lay a foundation for quality service delivery through public participation.

However, after 14 years the country is still a theatre for violent protests like xenophobic attacks, tremendous student strikes, violent union marches, and other fierce demonstrations; the nation exhibits a low level of public satisfaction with public service delivery as well as a decrease in confidence in the government (Marais, Everatt and Dube, 2007). Piper and Von Lieres (2008) argue

that instances of public participation such as community meetings, public hearings, consultations, or forums, sometimes give the impression of being a terrain for confrontation and affirmation of dominance by powerful leaders or political parties; they consider that *“poor implementation of public participation policy reflecting significant administrative weaknesses, a serious lack of political will amongst political elites to make public participation work, and lastly the poor design of these ‘invited spaces’”* invalidates the whole intention (Piper and Von Lieres, 2008). As a result, it seems that although significant resources (material and immaterial) have been invested, people do not understand what is going on, do not feel that they are listened to, do see their capital investment rather wasted, do not feel empowered, and do not feel they have any influence or control over any of the decisions which concern them, their communities and their lives.

Figure 1: A simple framework for public participation in government (Source: Author)



That brings into question the place of ICTs in supporting the process of public participation which is of concern here: does the use of ICTs help or does it hinder the articulation of community needs (expression of needs and empowerment)? Does it help or hinder the availability of information for decision making, development planning or policy making processes in government (Quality service delivery)? Does it help or hinder progress towards a better government (Confidence in government)? It seems at first that the potential of ICTs to better the articulation of communities' needs in the processes of public participation is not yet fully understood and not fully realised. This is the problem this project proposes to address. More specifically, this project will be focused on the use of mobile technology, principally short message services (sms), in the area of public participation concerning consultation for law and policy making in the city of Cape Town.

2. Research design

The aim of this study is to find out what in the use of technology in the articulation of needs in the public participation area of law and policy making consultation by communities in the Western Cape helps or hinders the process of public participation. Its intention is to devise guidelines for the implementation of e-participation systems which will improve processes of public participation in the Western Cape, in South Africa and in the world.

The study will look at the case of consultation through sms for a by-law to be passed in the city of Cape Town. In order to determine major external (to the individual) influencing factors, the initiative will be assessed using social and political sciences theories, as well as S&CI frameworks and TEF, in addition to Macintosh (2004).framework.

The articulation of needs is seen here as a doubly deliberative process: a gathering of individuals needs which will be channelled to concerned governmental executives as a product of community deliberation, where another deliberation (prioritisation) will take place, in order to find a common ground of understanding and recognition of the needs. The process informs the governmental decision: thus must be primarily informed in order to mitigate misunderstandings and disappointments around policies or service delivery. Therefore the process should comprehend at first a communication process (education and advocacy of governmental capabilities, administrative

processes, rule of participation, etc.); then an individual expression of it needs, the community gathering of needs, the mining of needs, the choice of needs to be fulfilled, the articulation of chosen needs, the prioritisation of needs, the expression of needs. It is a community choice; and in the case of South Africa it could be a social choice reconciled to a deliberative democracy as described by John S. Dryzek and Christian List (2003).

The interest is focused on individuals gathered as a community, and the local government with which they have to interact in the process of consultation. The assumption that is made here is that the majority of individuals have access to mobile technology, and that the government has the technological means to reach the community via that channel.

The idea is to apply UTAUT and S&CI to individuals in community and UTAUT and TEF to local government (figure 2) in order to generate interviews themes and to learn what favours and what impedes the process of articulating needs through mobile technology in consultation. The emphasis is on the use of SMS in that area of public participation.

In order to achieve this, the approach that is used should be able to accommodate the underlying complexity of the processes of articulating needs as well as communicating capabilities. Hence, an interpretive and interdisciplinary stand was taken and a qualitative design was drawn in approaching the stated problem. Literature analysis, interviews and focus groups are utilised, in that order.

Literature analysis: Reviews of academic publications, as well as available documentation from government sources are consulted in order to engage with the existing scientific body of knowledge and to account of actual local practice.

Interviews: In-depth interviews are conducted around specific themes with members of the government, members of parliament, as well as experts from industry, academic institutions and community organisations. In addition, individuals from Cape Town sub-council communities are interviewed. The interviewee are chosen using a statistical demographic mapping determination for the most representative individual of a community based on criteria like: race, gender, age, education, occupation, access to technology, technology proficiency, access to community information, political interest and steering aspiration (motivation). The intent is to learn what goes wrong, when, why and how, every time ICT are used to collect people needs and to tell them what the government can really do. For that purpose, 30 representative stakeholders of the process are interviewed.

Focus group deliberation: A group of 5 persons, using a selection technique similar to the one for interviews, is formed for the purpose of building a vision of a consultation system using mobile technologies.

The data collected will go through the process of content analysis; will be categorised, interpreted and compared with the insights from the literature; and patterns will be determined. The results will help to develop a model for articulation of needs through technology, as well as some guidelines for developing, implementing and using systems for that purpose.

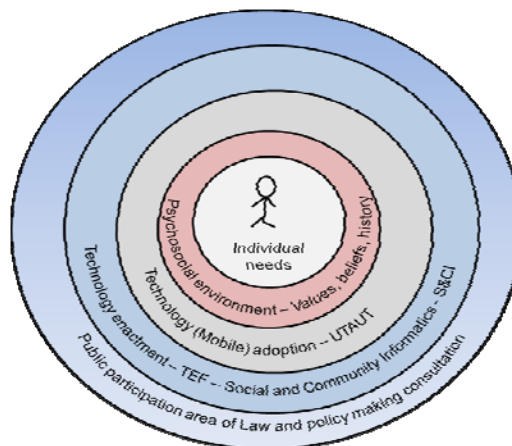


Figure 2: Research Model (Source: author)

3. Delineation of the research

This study looks at how communities express their needs through technology, and as such touches on the psychological and social factors influencing the articulation of the gap between private goals and private achievements leading to the use of technology as a valid medium to express individual needs which can be gathered to produce the community needs.

This study focuses on the law and policy making consultation area of the public participation process

The study is limited to the province of the Western Cape from which a generalisation will be derived, assuming that in the whole country contextual elements such as rural areas, modern (metro) areas, poverty, great wealth, races, academic and administrative institutions, pertinent skills, technological infrastructure are comparable.

This study assumes that an appropriate use of ICT is able to reduce costs, increase efficiency and effectiveness, and to add value to an organisation and its stakeholders.

This study assumes that South Africa's government has the means to acquire most of available technologies (Skills, knowledge, infrastructure, human and financial resources).

This study does not reveal sources of information which are sensitive or confidential nor South African national security elements described as such by relevant authorities.

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4. Contribution of the research

- A model for articulation of community needs in eParticipation
- A set of guidelines implementing mParticipation
- Bringing sound reasons why ICTs potentials are not fully understood and fully realised in developing countries
- Requirement engineering of eParticipation systems compatible with local communities contexts
- Help to empower the individual in community

5. Discussion and last words

Community articulation of needs as a deliberative activity, though electronic, bears the somehow unpredictability (complexity) of the human nature; hence, the model that is deployed in a particular setting would hardly be replicable somewhere else. The very close relationship between people and the way they unveil their needs calls for a tailored model where aspirations and strategic objectives shape the design of the process and supportive technology systems. At this point of the research endeavour there is a temptation to suggest an approach where ICTs are developed, implemented and used in accordance with the demand of a particular context

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