The role of local government in using social innovation for improved service delivery

A 21st century strategy with reference to South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that social innovation (SI) for delivering and improving local government services is already used with much success in European and Asian countries as well as in the United States of America. However, it appears as if in South Africa, the use of SI for improving service delivery is not receiving the attention policymakers have hoped for. This statement is based on the fact that although SI is addressed in many policy documents, it is still not sufficiently integrated in the National System of Innovation. Against the backdrop of a decline in key economic indicators and inadequate basic service delivery by local government, there has been a concomitant rise in municipal and labour protests and unnecessary turbulence in South Africa. The aim of this article is therefore to elucidate the role that local government could (and needs to) play when using SI for improved service delivery.

INTRODUCTION

Inadequate levels of municipal service provision are encountered in South Africa in general, and have led to several violent citizen-protest actions in the country. These protests are an indication that municipal service provision does not meet the expectations of communities (Van der Waldt 2014). Municipalities struggle with capacity shortages such as the lack of professional and experienced staff, financial shortages and the volume and complexity of local government (LG) legislation. Political challenges that influence local government service provision include factors such as the selection criteria for the appointment of municipal employees and political interference in municipal administration (Van der Waldt 2014). At present, in a local-government election year, South Africans have a low opinion

of their own municipalities, according to the results of an IPSOS survey (IPSOS 2016). This raises questions about the role of LG in using social innovation (SI) for improved service delivery.

Social innovation is already used for improving LG services with much success in China (Jing and Gong 2012:234) and South Korea (O'Byrne *et al*. 2014:59), as well as Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the United States of America (Moulaert, Martinelli, González and Swyngedouw 2007:203–205; OECD 2011:53–54, 57, 73). However, it appears that the use of SI for improving service delivery is not receiving the same amount of attention in South Africa. This statement is based on the fact that although SI is addressed in many policy documents, it is still not sufficiently integrated in the National System of Innovation. To conceptualise SI is not an easy task. The lack of a common understanding may be attributed to the tendency, when using the term "innovation", to focus on technological innovation (Grimm, Fox, Baines and Albertson 2013:437). The concept of innovation, for the purpose of this article, refers to the identification and implementation of a novel or significantly enhanced service or process, or a new method in professional practices, workplace organisation or external relations (UNESCO 2012:7). Innovation is not limited to high technology and large projects; it can be equally valuable when used in a sustainable manner in smaller projects that create jobs. What is certain, however, is that SI has the potential to solve societal problems and that it can be used as a new social process for the delivery of public services. The use of SI for improved LG service delivery would result in LGs sharing its service delivery responsibilities as well as its distributing power and resources amongst citizens.

In line with the above, the aim of this article is to elucidate the role that LG could (and needs to) play when using SI for improved service delivery. The article starts with an introduction to this proposed role of LG. Against this backdrop, a theoretical discussion, yet aimed at practical application, is provided in an attempt to reflect on the importance of LG's internal environment, which is critical for making effective use of SI in the 21st century. The factors impeding the use of SI are also discussed. The article concludes by presenting a conceptual framework for the role of LG in SI for improving service delivery.

As part of the qualitative research method, the article adopts a narrative and interpretative approach as a research strategy. The article is informed by a review of the academic literature, including books and peer-reviewed research articles, as well as by official government documents. The methodological processes adopted are analytic and synthetic. It is analytic in that it examines the works of some scholars who have written about topics similar to this one. The synthetic nature of the approach lies in the discussion of the role LG has to play and the challenges it faces in utilising SI for delivering and improving services.

ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT WHEN USING SOCIAL INNOVATION

Local government applies SI across a range of service delivery issues, and is therefore considered fundamental in underpinning SI strategies for optimal service delivery (Dodd, Franke and Moody 2011:9). But what does this role of LG include when it comes to SI strategies aimed at improved service delivery? According to Stumbraitè-Vilkisiené (2010:83), although citizens can simultaneously assume the role of consumer and co-producer of

services, the role that LG plays during service delivery will depend on the role that citizens assume. However, the role that LG plays will also determine, to a large extent, the nature of citizen participation as well as how active that participation is. It can be reasoned that the same applies regarding LG's role when SI is used for improved service delivery. Social innovation alters the way a system operates by challenging the rudimentary processes of governance that dictates people's conduct as well as power and resource distribution, and this fact provides the basis for the role(s) of LG in SI. Bourgon (2010:204) defines these roles as partner, contributor, facilitator and/or leader, and LG can perform these roles during the enabling and empowering of citizens when using SI.

In the role of a partner, LG uses its authority and influence as well as resources (e.g. human, capital and expertise) to encourage the involvement of others (Bourgon 2010:204). A partnership implies that both parties contribute to the particular service and, through their combined activities, derive future benefits (National Council for Public-Private Partnerships 2013, cited in Hilvert and Swindell 2013:243). The benefits associated with such partnerships could comprise improved service delivery, increased knowledge, realising a collective vision for development, and sustainable initiatives (Hart and Swindell 2013:243). A partnership is recognised as integral to the monitoring and evaluation processes in countries around the world, and it enhances citizen participation through this responsive and inclusive approach (Matsiliza 2012:67).

Local government can also act as a contributor. Contributions may include taking responsibility for identifying issues, implementing solutions and being accountable for results. The role of facilitator encourages associations that are driven by self-organising and governance networks, which are based on collaboration (Klijn 2008; Teisman and Klijn 2008, cited in Bourgon 2010:204). In the role of a leader, LG is required to be proactive in co-creating and evolving with others the actions of partners in order to improve policy outcomes (Adams and Hess 2010:145; Klijn and Teisman 2006, cited in Bourgon 2010:204).

It appears as if LG becomes equal to its co-producers of services when SI is used to improve service delivery. For LG to engage in and strengthen these roles during the SI process, a range of actions need to be considered fundamental. These actions can be categorised in terms of initiating collaborations, enabling and empowering citizens, and distributing power and resources.

The first action, initiation of collaborations, aims at establishing interactions between citizens and societal partners as well as between citizens and LG. Service delivery thus becomes people-centred and inclusive. This action further aims to derive tangible solutions from these collaborations. The initiation of collaborations presents prospects for enhancing service quality, saving costs and exchanging expertise and skills (Hilvert and Swindell 2013:250). Local governments play a central role in initiating these collaborations (Levinthal and Warglien 1999, cited in Bourgon 2012:208). It is, however, of the utmost importance that prior to initiating collaborations, the rationale and purpose should be clearly identified (Hilvert and Swindell 2013:244). This step will ensure that the needs of the partners are addressed to their satisfaction (Hilvert and Swindell 2013:244).

The second action, enabling and empowering citizens, aims to add value to citizens' ability to solve the societal problems they encounter (Adams and Hess 2010:145). Through this action, LG facilitates a more prominent role for citizens in the governance of LG service delivery, and it becomes obliged to share some of its responsibility with citizens and

institutionalise collaborative practices with them instead of acting as experts. Apart from SI being instrumental in enabling and empowering citizens, it also culminates in the third action, namely distribution of power and resources to citizens for them to become active participants (Edwards-Schachter, Matti and Alcántara 2012:672; Leadbeater 2004, cited in Williamson 2014:302). The result of this action is a transition where citizens become actively involved in improved service delivery, which LG facilitates to turn service delivery into a people-centred function (Waheduzzaman and Mphande 2014:39). This is important as it contributes to deriving solutions through ongoing participation and interactions between citizens and societal actors.

According to Jing and Gong (2012:234), it has become an international trend to engage citizens in public service delivery during the SI process through collaboration, the enabling and empowerment of citizens and resource and power distribution. The authors contend that this can result in high quality or good governance (steering society through partnerships and networks between civil society organisations, business corporations and government), the fostering of civic engagement, as well as informed and responsible citizens (Lee and Thynne 2011, cited in Jing and Gong 2012:234). This is, however, easier said than done, and Gaventa (2004, cited in Waheduzzaman and Mphande 2014:39) argues that establishing these relations between LG and citizens poses a challenge for the 21st century. Thus, in order for LG to fulfil the roles of partner, contributor, facilitator and/or leader during the SI process and in order to engage in the actions that underpin these roles, specific conditions of its internal environment will have to be addressed, as discussed in the next section.

INTERNAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

The successful implementation of public service delivery in collaboration with citizens through SI will require LG to address specific conditions in its internal environment. For the purpose of this article, the following description by Mofolo (2012:24) will be used: the internal environment comprises the organisational culture, goals and mission, the organisation itself and its management, as well as its resources (e.g. human, capital and expertise). A number of conditions are considered essential for an LG internal environment that makes effective use of SI, including fostering a positive and creative organisational culture, developing a learning organisation, modernising systems and processes, encouraging collaboration and partnerships with citizens, applying innovative management practices, demanding decisive leadership, practising open communication and securing sustainable resources (OECD 2011:99).

Establishing and fostering a positive and creative organisational culture will compel LGs to demonstrate a sense of acceptance and openness towards the contributions of citizens and recognise their contributions as instrumental (OECD 2011:99). The concept of openness, in this context, refers to the ability of LG to integrate new knowledge, such as SI practices, into the existing knowledge of the organisation (Harrisson, Chaari and Comeau-Vallée 2012:5). By being more open to the contributions from citizens, a culture of innovation may emerge within communities themselves. This development is important to ensure that citizens stay committed to the joint outcomes of their own contributions (Hilvert and Swindell 2013:244)

and to encourage more active participation by citizens in innovation efforts that are aimed at service delivery improvements.

For LG to be more open, it would have to adapt how service delivery is usually thought about by making citizens the centre of the SI process. Furthermore, LG would have to clearly articulate the expectations it has regarding the participation of citizens in addressing unrealistic objectives, mutual expectations and differences. The disclosure of expectations makes the process transparent by fully revealing the intentions of the respective role players (Harrisson *et al*. 2012:5).

The success of LG in using SI for improved service delivery relies strongly on developing an organisational culture of learning driven by a willingness for sharing knowledge and skills (Verschuere, Brandsen and Pestoff 2012:1090; OECD 2011:99). Developing and applying systems and processes supporting knowledge sharing are thus fundamental. Existing LG systems and processes need to be assessed in terms of their relevance to supporting the use of SI, and if need be, they should be modernised. This could entail improvements in how the impact of programmes is monitored, innovative programme evaluation and introducing more sophisticated ways of budget monitoring (OECD 2011:99). Of importance regarding monitoring programme impact and programme evaluation is the feedback that is obtained through these processes. Such feedback should be used to bring about distinct improvements in current services being rendered. Not using feedback from monitoring programme impact and programme evaluation could have adverse consequences for service delivery. Feedback obtained from these processes then also becomes valuable when planning future service delivery initiatives.

The next aspect that is essential for LGs to make effective use of SI for improved service delivery is applying innovative management practices and demanding decisive leadership. Such support could include an increase in rewards for LG administrators who engage in innovative practices. Support that is provided internally through management and leadership should also be expanded at community level by using incentives to encourage the participation of citizens in SI. However, rewarding and incentivising innovative behaviour and establishing systems and processes that will create an internal environment that harnesses the potential of SI requires resources are required.

Encouraging collaboration and partnerships with citizens and practising open communication are important in using SI for improved service delivery. This requires LGs to adopt an external perspective to derive learning experiences and for the purposes of benchmarking (OECD 2011:99). Central to this is communication with citizens in the form of feedback from both sides. LG can incorporate feedback regarding what works and what does not into its external environment, and it can integrate successful practices into its internal environment. Feedback from citizens will again inform what works and what does not work for the community. Such feedback could essentially emanate from programme evaluation and monitoring programme impact.

Programme evaluation and the monitoring of programmes will allow sustainable resources to be obtained. Resources in the internal environment of a municipality comprise expertise, capital and human resources (Mofolo 2012:24), but could also be obtained from citizens and other organisations in the form of raw materials, equipment, information, knowledge and human resources (Mofolo 2012:24). The contribution of resources by citizens and other organisations is essential for reducing the use of public resources (Ryan 2012:315).

FACTORS IMPEDING THE USE OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

Several factors could be seen as potential barriers to the effective use of SI for improved service delivery. It is important for LGs to identify any barrier in advance in order to either limit its impact or plan around that impact. Several factors (internal or external to LG) may impede the use of SI, including, amongst others, a lack of skills, resources, accountability, organisational culture, trust, equity and inclusion, willingness and ease of citizen participation, probity, and multi-level governance (OECD 2011:88–89; Verschuere *et al*. 2012:1087). These factors are briefly explained below.

The use of SI is a concept that has only recently captured the attention of LG and citizens as a means to improve service delivery. It is anticipated that citizens and other role players might not be adequately informed about the use of SI. A lack of skills will influence the confidence of these role players and will directly influence their ability to contribute meaningfully. The use of SI further relies on the availability of resources. The SI process will require the use of innovative resources in addition to the traditional resources (e.g. human, capital and expertise), which are already known to LG and citizens. Such additional resources may include resources from LG's internal environment (already mentioned in the previous section), but may also involve forming partnerships to meet financial needs, identifying benefits for the community in a more innovative way and investing in skills development in the community with the sustainability of the project in mind (Mofolo 2012:24).

Resources from the external environment of LG comprise raw materials, equipment, information, knowledge and human resources not traditionally used for service delivery. As much as these resources could assist LG to implement service delivery improvements, a lack thereof could also present an obstacle. Consequently, different scenarios can be deduced, namely that if resources can be secured from the internal municipal environment even if additional resources are inadequate in its external environment, service delivery through SI could be possible. However, if resources cannot be secured from both the internal and external municipal environments, then service delivery improvements could become more difficult to achieve. This is particularly relevant in the case of LGs that often depend on their external environments for additional resources, especially if they cannot secure such additional resources from their internal environments.

Over the past years, LGs have relied heavily on their natural resources to survive the worldwide economic crisis, but the depletion of natural resources has required LGs to do much more with less and has consequently emphasised the sustainable management of innovative projects. The accountable and responsible use of resources is thus of the utmost importance. To ensure this accountability, it is important for a balance to be maintained regarding the role of LG and the role of citizens when SI is used for service delivery improvements. Citizens are already burdened by paying taxes, so LG has the primary responsibility when it comes to service delivery, although citizens may become partners in service delivery through the SI process (OECD 2011:88).

When SI is used for improving service delivery, both LG's traditional role in service delivery and its relationship with citizens need to change. This traditional role is strongly imbedded in the organisational culture. As mentioned previously, SI requires citizens to play the role of partners by participating at each stage (co-planning, co-design, co-delivery and

evaluation) of the service delivery cycle. Through its administrators, the LG organisational culture needs to become one that enables citizens and service users and that provides them with support (Bovaird 2006:95). This transition in the roles of LG and citizens is probably the most important factor impeding the use of SI and may result in opposition and resistance from the side of LG administrators (Hilvert and Swindell 2013:250; OECD 2011:88). In addition, this shift might affect the trust that citizens have in LG.

Trust, which is regarded as the prerequisite for any relationship, is a factor that may present a potential barrier. If SI does not bring about the changes expected by citizens, citizens could become sceptical of the SI process (OECD 2011:88). This scepticism may result in citizens' disengaging from the SI process, which defeats the purpose of using SI for improved service delivery. The reason for this is that SI is predicated on collaborations with, amongst others, citizens, and if they disengage from such collaboration, it is no longer SI. Conversely, such scepticism might result in reluctance from citizens to engage in future SI, which might result in the inclusion of only certain groups of citizens.

Inclusion and equity become barriers when citizens who are less vocal are excluded and when some groups of citizens feature more strongly during the SI process (Bourgon 2010:204; OECD 2011:88; Verschuere *et al*. 2012). Equity is synonymous with the principles of public services, namely fairness, equality and continuity, which are considered consistent with SI. Local government has an important role to play in facilitating this equality, fairness and continuity in service provision by ensuring that all citizens participate fairly through the SI process. Local governments should ensure that they manage this process of participation and representation with the necessary caution so as not to exclude any particular group of citizens. At the same time, LGs should ensure that they put in place the necessary strategies and make the necessary efforts to encourage the equal participation of all citizens.

Such strategies relate to encouraging willingness amongst citizens to participate in the SI process. If citizens are not willing to participate, then that unwillingness could become a potential barrier to the SI process. Citizens' unwillingness could be linked to uncertainty as to why they should participate as well as their individual motivation (Verschuere *et al*. 2012:1086–1087). Citizens should therefore be fully informed of the importance and benefits of their participation. However, in addition to information and the articulation of benefits, citizens' motivation to participate depends on how a service makes an impact on their lives (Verschuere *et al*. 2012:1087). Local governments should direct their efforts at developing strategies that encourage the participation of citizens who are affected by a particular service, not those citizens for whom a service holds no significance. Citizens who are not affected by a service may not be sufficiently willing to participate.

Even if a service makes an impact on the lives of citizens, Verschuere *et al*. (2012:1088) are of the view that if citizens are required to exert greater effort to participate, it could dissuade their participation. Local government thus has the task of ensuring that citizen participation in the SI process becomes as effortless as possible. Similarly, citizens' unwillingness to participate could be linked to how easy it is for them to participate, another factor that could serve as a barrier. Ease of participation could be influenced by factors such as the availability and accessibility of information to citizens. Despite these potential barriers, engaging citizens in SI for improved service delivery still appears to be essential in terms of LG service delivery.

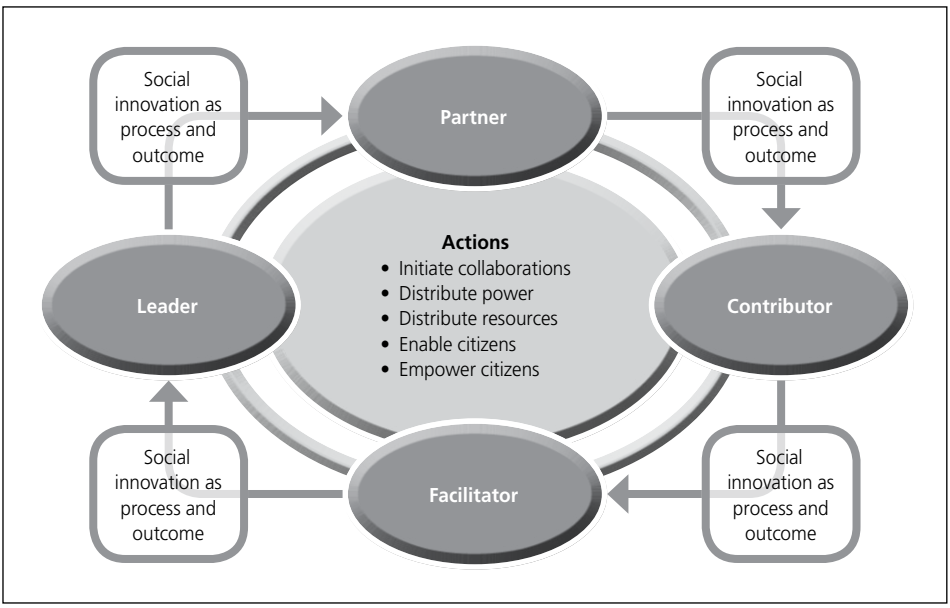
CONCEPTUALISING THE ROLE OF SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN SOCIAL INNOVATION

Inadequate basic service delivery has been on the rise along with municipal protests, with the management ability of LGs coming under scrutiny. These have weakened the morale of the public as well as the people's confidence in LGs. Local governments can no longer provide services and try to make improvements in services based on a traditional role. With the nearing LG elections in August 2016, LGs need to ensure that they make effective use of SI for improved service delivery. By considering this new role of LG, which is predicated on SI, figure 1 proposes a framework that captures the respective roles that LG needs to play to ensure that it makes effective use of SI. The actions that could underpin the fulfilment of these roles are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows that the proposed roles of LG in making use of SI for improved service delivery could be that of partner, contributor, facilitator, and/or leader. The actions that support these roles, namely initiating collaborations, distributing power, distributing resources, enabling citizens and empowering citizens, are also illustrated in the figure. Without supportive actions, SI cannot be accomplished and the respective roles of LG will not be fulfilled. Hence, these actions should be considered integral to each role and obliges LG to ask how it will initiate collaborations, distribute power and resources, and enable and empower citizens. Asking these questions enables LG to undertake more effective planning regarding how it will take on each role. It could be argued that if the respective roles are not underpinned by these actions, they could become mere formalities. The risk in this is that it negates the purpose of using SI for improved service delivery.

Furthermore, figure 1 illustrates that these roles can be applied to the two purposes of SI. The first is the use of SI to address a societal problem, for example, delivering a particular

Figure 1: Proposed roles of local government in social innovation



service. The second purpose is the use of SI as a process to address a societal problem, that is, when collaboration between different role players is used to address that problem. When considering SI as a vehicle for service delivery, the different roles could serve as a guide to inform the role that LG could play when using SI not only for the purpose of addressing a problem, but also when it is used for the purpose of improved service delivery. By adopting this approach, these roles could assist LG in clarifying the role that it will play in rendering a particular service. For example, it could decide to be a partner with citizens and other stakeholders from its external environment, to be a contributor in delivering the service(s) along with citizens, to merely facilitate the process while citizens are the delivery agents of the service(s), or to take leadership. The same could apply when SI is used for the purpose of improved service delivery. Local government could therefore assume one of these roles when SI is used as a vehicle for service delivery and when it is used for service improvements.

It could be argued that the adoption of more than one role could create confusion amongst the respective role players, which could in turn result in the envisaged outcome of the SI process not being reached. It is unlikely that LG could assume more than one of these roles simultaneously for one particular service. This does not mean, however, that the role LG assumes at the start must stay constant during the delivery of that service. Changes in the availability of role players' resources could affect this constancy and could result in a change in the role of LG. This not only has implications for LG but could also result in changes for the role of citizens. The capacity of all role players should therefore be thoroughly assessed when LG determines the role that it will assume when using SI. The same applies to the role of citizens. In addition, by clarifying LG's role from the initial stages, all the role players are clear as to the role that they could play when SI is used.

Figure 1 further illustrates that the respective roles of LG could be used when SI is used as a process. When SI is used as a process to address a societal problem, LG engages in collaborations with citizens and other role players. The same actions that could underpin the respective roles LG could adopt when using SI to address a societal problem could also underpin its roles when it utilises SI as a process to address a societal problem.

CONCLUSION

The use of SI by LGs for improved service delivery has had implications for the role of LG as well as of citizens and other role players. This has resulted in a change in the traditional role that LG plays when rendering services which, in the absence of clarity, could result in failure of the SI process. In view of this, the article set out to elucidate the role that LG could (and needs to) play when using SI for improved service delivery. This was achieved through a conceptual framework that LG can use and that proposes a number of roles that LG could fulfil when using SI for improving service delivery. Of significance regarding the proposed roles is the fact that they could be considered both when SI is used to address a societal problem through service delivery, as well as when SI is used as a process to address a service delivery problem.

In this article, actions that could underpin the respective roles of LG when using SI were also considered. It was argued that these actions (the initiation of collaborations, the distribution of power and resources and the enabling and empowerment of citizens) are

integral to the respective roles of LG. These actions are considered critical in assisting LGs to undertake better planning regarding how each role could be fulfilled. It was highlighted that if these actions do not underpin the proposed roles, these roles could become mere formalities without achieving improved service delivery. More comprehensive research is proposed that will further delineate the roles of LG in SI in order for it to effectively use SI for improved service delivery. This article has thus suggested that the role of LG in SI should be clarified, as this would also clarify the role of citizens and other role players when SI is used for improved service delivery.

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