Communication in the South African Public Participation Process

The Effectiveness of Communication Tools

M P Sebola
School of Public Administration
University of Limpopo
South Africa

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to analyse the importance and the effectiveness of communication tools used by the legislatures in the South African public participation process. Public participation is one of the cornerstones of democracy in modern governments which if well cherished may satisfy the needs of the majority of the citizens and gives them pride as contributors to adopted policy decisions. People's voices are important in decisions that are taken by the government on their behalf. The people and access to information about public participation is not as easy as it sound in the public administration environment. This article therefore uses literature approach in order to argue that communication in the public participation process would not improve policy decision making in South Africa unless effective communication tools are adopted. This article concludes that improved effective communication approach to the citizens of the country can assist the communities to participate in policy decision-making in a manner that is effective.

INTRODUCTION

Public participation is a concept that may be defined differently by different people and in a variety of contexts. To others public participation is a concept that can be used interchangeably with concept such as civil participation, community participation and citizen participation (Kanyane 2004; Ababio 2007; Sebola & Fourie 2006; Sebola, 2016). Other studies provide distinct differences of those concepts confused to be synonyms with public participation. Mathebula (2015) have argued that the said concepts are indeed different in context, interpretation, meaning and application. To others the terms "public", "involvement" and "participation" are used as buzz words for democracy through participation. Slotterback & Crosby (2012) have argued that although many governments and officials recognises public participation, but do not have a good understanding of designing good processes that will

achieve desirable outcomes from the process. Bryson & Carroll (2002) simply defined it as the involvement of people in a problem solving or decision-making process that may interest or affect them. The important questions here are how do we communicate the involvement of people in such problem solving or decision making processes? Arguably, public participation is reasonably possible if the information strategy to the public is effective. That effectiveness is to be achieved through effective communication tools. In the South African legislative environment, the important question is: Are the Communication tools used to reach the general public effective? In looking into whether the public participation process in South Africa is well communicated and effective, this article will keep the relevance of its focus on why public participation and what public participation entails, the public participation theory adopted by South Africa, which communication tools are used by South African legislature? How effective are communication tools used by the South African legislature?

WHAT PUBLIC PARTICIPATION ENTAILS

Literature argues that the concept of public participation is well known in Political Science and Development literature (Anon) as compared to other disciplines such as Public Administration. Political Science has put emphasis on public participation in policies while Development Studies have emphasised the importance of community participation in development issues. Marzuki (2015) argues that public participation is important to educate people about the governments' development programmes. Moreover, Nyalungu (2001) attested that public participation is a concept that is relatively new in the South African soil which suggests that there is a likelihood of some learning curves for the South African government in achieving a true success of what could be termed a public participation method. Worrying cases however still exists that even in the developed countries such as Switzerland and United Kingdom(UK) there is a general apathy towards political participation which reveals itself through poor voter turnout (Van Belle & Cupido 2013). From the United Kingdom (UK) perspective there is a general perception that public participation is merely a legitimisation process which aims at achieving the already decided ideals about a policy option (Heffron & Haynes (2014). But considering the neo-liberal approaches to policies in the country concerned the perception could not be far from the truth.

Rowe & Frewer (2006) refer to public participation as a practice that involves the public in agenda setting, decision-making and policy formulation in an organisation. Public participation is a concept that is synonymous with democracy, involvement, engagement, transparency and good governance (Bozo & Hiemer 2016). Without the aforementioned elements the process of public participation may be thought of as having been flawed in implementation. To the South Africans their constitution is based on principles of good governance and therefore participation is a right that holds the government accountable to the public. A strong and a sound public participation process are deeply rooted on its recognition of the public as the engines of policy formulation and decision making. The involvement of the public in policy decision making is seen as an aspect that makes the lives of the policy makers more simple than complex (Bryson & Carroll 2002) in the sense that the public themselves speak out in policy formulation and decision making. This is contrary to the rational policy decision makers who do something different in the sense that they believe

in the idea of the expert rather than the public (Parker 2002). It has however been argued that pure rational analysis which leads to unquestionable ethical decision making is very problematic and difficult in the policy decision-making environment. A sound and strong public participation practice is the one that recognises the people as the centre of public policy decision-making.

WHY PUBLIC PARTICIPATION?

The question as to why people must participate in policy making and decision is simple and has everything to do with their interests and needs being recognised as part of the overall government system. While being part of the system may mean something else, because people are likely to be part of systems without being considered on important decisions, but in this case the public are to be considered as engines and co-owners of the adopted policies of government (Sebola 2009). Public policies are to be based on people's needs and interests and therefore no expert should claim to represent the public's interests rather than the publics' legitimate claim that can only be achieved through the public participation process. The public participate so that they can own the policies that are formulated and adopted by government of the day. It is however argued that in most public policy making processes and procedures, more often than not, the governments dictate for the public to the extent that little public interests and needs are accommodated in public policies adopted by the government. Dunn (2004) has maintained that public policies could be what government intends to do or not to do. That in itself proves that the public participation process results may not dictate for the government to take a decision that reflects the wants of the public than the wants of the ruling elite. More than not governments analyse the results of the public participation process in relation to own ideologies and agenda of the ruling class. For example; a public participation process that will reveal that South Africans are in favour of Capital punishment will not see implementation because the ruling party's (in this case the African National Congress) standpoint on Capital punishment is very clear.

COMMUNICATION IN PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Participatory democracy is not a new phenomenon and has taken place in ancient countries such as Greece. Based on that score governments subscribe to various approaches of participative democracies. For the relevance of my discussion I will deliberately ignore the neo-liberal market and the liberal representative approaches because in both approaches the public are regarded as passive citizens in policy making. The deliberative approach is the most important and relevant as compared to others (Fung 2015) in this case. This is mostly because the South African parliament is regarded as a "deliberative law making body" (Czapaski & Manjoo 2006). This indeed characterises the South African law making process which claim to put people as the centre of policy making. Unlike other forms of participative democracy, deliberative approach shows that democracy is not just simple set of rules, procedures and institutional designs and political participation but rather a process in which citizens' exercises ever-deepening control over decisions (Anon). It indeed recognises that

the public are to be consulted and informed at all stages of public policies (Maele, Pond, Williams & Dubsky 2000). There are howeveran emerging trend of scholarship which asks as to whether public participation is an essential mechanism to achieve democracy or a mechanism to achieve something else (Abelson & Gauvin 2006:1-2). Carpini, Cook & Jacobs (2004:316) have argued that the deliberative theory has lagged significantly behind in terms of theory. This only tells us that like other forms of participatory democracy such as liberal market and the liberal representative approaches, the deliberative approach has weaknesses that need substantial revamping. Dukeshire & Thurlow (2002:1) noted that even though governments around the globe recognises the importance of public participation but there are real challenges such as lack of understanding of the policy process, resources, reliance on volunteers, lack of access to information, poor representation of rural communities, poor relation between government and rural communities and time and policy time lines restrictions. On the other hand Claridge (2004:33) link the limitations of participation to only four elements which are institutional, cultural, knowledge and financial. In South Africa however the view is still traditional and participation is viewed as a fundamental element of democracy based on deliberative approach and hence the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, 1996 Section 118 read thus;

> "(1) A provincial government must;
> (a) facilitate public involvement in the legislative and other processes of the legislature and its committee; and
> (b) conduct its business in an open manner, and hold its sittings and those of its committees, in public, but reasonable measures may be taken-
> (i) to regulate public access, including access of the media to legislature and its committees; and
> (ii) to provide for the searching of any person and, where appropriate, the refusal of entry to, or the removal of any person
> (2) A provincial legislature may not exclude the public, including the media, from a sitting of a committee unless it is reasonable and justifiable to do so in an open and democratic society.

From the above legislative provision it becomes clear that public involvement in governments' affair is allowed so that the public and relevant institutions can exercise their constitutional rights to be informed and participate. The purpose of public participation is to ensure that stakeholders affected by public authority's decision have a right to be consulted and contribute to such decision. Not only is the adopted participative theory that will determine the success of public participation in South Africa, but how the process of public participation is communicated to the participants is very important. Not only is communication a problem in public participation, but also getting people to participate in policy decisions is highly difficult (Priscoli 1995) if communication tools used are not effectively used to reach the general public. The dissemination of information on public participation is somewhat not easy and continues to be a legislature problem worldwide. The public will ever argue that their major problem in government participation mechanism is simply lack of information on significant activities of the government of the day (Dukeshire & Thurlow 2002:1-3). While it is argued that communication with the public can be an effective tool of achieving participation

the path of communication is not easy to drive on. The political environment is different from other environments in the sense that it is charged with emotions, ideas, conflict and partisanship (Kolovos & Harris 2005). Communication of political issues is always viewed as an exchange of political information between the politician and the public (Giemza, n.d: 165). The effective participation tools in the forms of communication are hard to find and use (Cutlip 2012). Meaningful public participation takes place only if there is a continuous flow of information to the public which continuously promote interaction between politicians and the public. This communication should be a two way other than a linear top-down process (UNESCO 1999:8) between the legislature and the public. The legislatures are to be cautioned of the use of language and tools that can be friendly towards the public. It is indeed the manner of the communication that would determine the seriousness at which the public should consider calls for legislative participation.

EFFECTIVE COMMINICATION TOOLS

The success of Public participation is dependent on a variety of factors in as far as the public is to be engaged. Discounting the effective communication tools and financial costs associated with the process itself there is also a problem of the public's willingness to participate in policy processes. There is a problem with those "willing to participate, but unable to participate because of limitations such as language barrier, geographical distance and lack of resources and those "able to participate, but unwilling because of important commitments, no interests in politics, see no personal gains and do not trust the government to take their input into consideration (Cropley & Phibbs). United Nations (2010) also noted that often the concerned publics are not even informed of why their contributions are notconsidered.

On the other angle, it is not only communication tools that can ensure attainment of public participation in South African legislative environment, but only the utilisation of effective communication tools is likely to ensure the highest level of public participation in the policy formulation and decision making processes. It is argued that the current generation would like to engage the government's transparency and accountability through modern technologies (National democratic Institute, n.d:1-5) such as twitters, Facebooks and WhatsApp's, however the governments sound to be far from accepting and utilising such technologies (Marrek 2014; Robert & Namusonge 2015). Many legislatures around the globe face challenges of effective communication tools to engage the public on governments' programmes of action. Kurtz (1997:6) indicated that the legislators in the US use simple communication tools such as one to one communication, telephones and emails and letters. The United Kingdom (UK) has moved from the local meetings to a series of legally required procedures (Hefron & Heyness 2014). All such communications and participation are tools which Cutlip (2012) calls lower level participation tools and refers to higher levels tools as the one that involves citizens juries, planning cells, focus groups, two way inter action, discussions and deliberation sessions between policy makers and the public.

South Africa also does not use different methods of communication compared to the rests in the globe as it also uses Public liaison and media liaison approaches which are predominantly used to engage the public on governments programme of action. I.e. publication and broadcast of legislative proceedings, journalistic coverages, parliamentary

newsletters and legislative websites. These forms of communication also have their own limitations. National Democratic Institute (2013) noted that only communication tools that fit the circumstances of a country are likely to be effective and make significant contribution in the manner that the public may participate in public policy formulation and decision making process. Public administration and the political actors are encouraged to apply a communication model that encourages public participation in the communication process. It may seem however that not much has been achieved in the communication ecology of the society (Warnok 2007:1) in the sense that no communication tool has been completely done away with in political communication. There have been developments though with the development of digital and electronic technology to complement the print and interpersonal communication tools that have been and are still in use in communicating with the public for policy formulation and making.

Publication and Broadcast of legislative proceedings

The communication of the legislative proceedings can be disseminated in two ways; namely through publication or through live broadcast. Publication of the legislative proceedings is a common means of communicating debates of the legislature to the public. However in developing countries such as South Africa the publication of the proceedings faces not only limitation of transcribing skills, but also dissemination of such information to the overall population has limitation. To a particular extent some officials regard their transcription responsibility as work as usual and do not see the importance of sending such information to the public. The poor people are often unable to access channels and receive policy relevant information (Warnok 2007:43). While the broadcasting of legislative proceedings is done and often very clear there are no local language interpreters of debates in the legislature for ordinary South Africans to follow the debate. The debates are mostly followed in language of the elites. Haase (2007) indicated that in Africa most countries use English than local languages. Such is done to avoid the use of any influential African language over others. Often it is argued that it is difficult for legislatures to move away from such traditional methods of political communication to the mass. Such was retained through colonialism and to date.

Journalistic coverages

The public opinion about policy choices is mostly shaped by the media. It is indeed the duty of the media to bring information to the public (Westling 2007:3). The type of authority in place such as authoritarian, imperialists, Islamic or European will determine the extent of the perception of the media used to communicate policy processes (Tehranian 1997). A perception is that in developing countries, South Africa included legislative proceedings are mostly covered by the state run media. In South Africa the SABC's are state run and often the perception could be that state run media is likely to communicate propaganda rather than actual legislative situations. The perception of the public about typical communication model has an impact on how they will react to a call for public participation. A feeling by members of the public that the information from the TV or radio station is used for propaganda, they are likely not to heed to such calls.

Parliamentary newsletter

This system is mostly used by legislators with literate society and good postal services (Kurtz 1997:24). Newsletters are often published widely to reach the members of the public about legislative processes and functions. South Africa provides such tools of communications, but such communications are not able to reach the general population that wants to participate in public policies. Often such communication tools are dumped at the GCIS departments than to all public offices. In developing countries such as South Africa resources implications may prohibit the legislature's ability to distribute materials to targeted citizens.

Local institutions

Local institutions such as municipalities are often regarded as tools of communicating governments' information to the public. At local level public meetings are organised so that the politicians can have contact with the electorates (Kurtz 1997:24). In South Africa local municipalities are currently centers of political power struggles and using them for communicating government information to the public is viewed from a biased perspective. And often even if information is disseminated it goes to selected publics that are aligned to the ruling party than the general public. In South Africa and other African countries information passed on to the public through the municipality is regarded as biased and belonging to voters of the ruling party than the country.

ARE THERE ALTERNATIVE MEANS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION TOOLS FOR SOUTH AFRICA?

Government communication mechanisms could be as old as the origin of governments on the globe. And the word of mouth approaches have been previously used in politics than other forms of communication (Fay n.d:1). While it is acknowledged that governments of the globe are reluctant to formally adopt the digital and electronic media for communicating public participation, it may seem there are little options or possibility of avoiding the reality that is approaching. It cannot be argued that social media currently plays an influential part in communication strategies of political campaigns that reflect information about policy preferences and opinions of political actors and the public (Nulty, Theocharis, Popa, Parnet & Benoit 2015). A need therefore arises for the South African government to adopt new and faster means of modern social media communication tools such as twitters, Facebooks and WhatsApp's (Maarek 2014). Bohler-Muller & Van der Merwe (2011:4) noted that Africa recently started showing a great interest in the use of social media with about 17 million people in Africa using Facebook constantly. Giemza (n.d:168) noted that the good thing about social media is that because of its originality it is more trustworthy than traditional media where information has been edited on numerous occasions. In a positive way many writings confirm that social media can reach both literate and non-literate individuals at a high interaction level format (Haase 2007; Vaccari n.d:2). Despite its user friendly, social media is highly influential as it has been proved in Egypt as a course of the so called Arab Spring in 2011 (Stork 2011:1-37; Aronson 2011; Sebola, Tsheola & Molopa 2014). Recent

perspectives are also demonstrating that social media is busy imposing changes on both traditional political communication strategies. It is argued that because of its easy access, interactive quality, number of users and speed (Aronson 2011), social media stand a chance to revolutionise and simplify the public policy participation process. It should however not be forgotten that social media is also not an end itself as much as traditional communication methods are not. The two are complementary of each other's role.

It is however acknowledged that depending on the typical government system in power, communication of government information have always been selective to the public and making sure that particular information does not reach certain people. Social media have closed those restrictive practices in governments (Centre for European Studies n.d:5). In South Africa the apartheid regime communicated policy decisions to the white minority groups than to the majority of the South African racial groups. As much as literature attests that government around the globe do not appreciate new technologies for formal public participation, it is unfortunate as such seem to be the only available option. Bohnen & Kallmorgen (2009) argues that the users of these politicised networks today break the system that was previously reserved for insiders only. South Africa like other countries of the globe cannot afford to dodge the realities of applying and accepting the use of social networks to engage the public on policy issues. While it is acknowledged that social media can be used for communication, it is still possible that such communication tools cannot be used without recognising other forms of traditional communication tools. South Africa has a limitation of literacy level like all other countries in Africa. The largest majority of voters in South Africa are the youth who fortunately can communicate in the language understood by them through social media. But the older generation because of their literacy level will continue to struggle not because of access to new technology but because some may not be able to communicate in the language used.

CONCLUSION

This article evaluated the effective use of communication tools by the South African legislature for public participation purposes in public policy processes. It has been argued in the article that it is not the communication tools adopted that determines the successful participation of the South African in public policy processes, but indeed the effective use of those communication tools. From the discussion it came pout clear that the South African government uses common communication tools with other legislatures on the globe. Their communication tools which include Publication and Broadcast of legislative proceedings, Journalistic coverages, parliamentary newsletters legislative websites and local political institutions shows to be having challenges experienced in any country. Perused literature indicated that governments around the globe do not appreciate the oncoming social media as an acceptable tool for communicating public policy issues with the public mostly because it destroys the legitimacy of classified information which should not be shared with all members of the public. Some opponents views the use of social media for political engagement as an issue that is very risky to governments especially considering how social media played a role in the Arabs Spring of 2011. It is however concluded that social media if well managed can be an effective way of communicating public policy with the public

because the public viewpoint are likely to be original. South Africa should embrace the use of social media in public policy formulation without discarding other traditional forms of communication tools.

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