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Co-creating an open platform at the local governance level: How openness is enacted in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

The open mode of thinking, acting and being has been associated with liberating, participatory and collaborative arrangements that have prompted us to redefine how research, science, innovation and citizenship are to be conceived. In an era where much is said about the 'open society' and open innovation, looking at the interplay between involvement, technology and social good becomes of particular importance and interest. Having employed an action research approach, we examine how actors have enacted an open technology at the local governance level in a town in Zambia. Our interest is in how the different groups of local people have co-created the technology through multiple negotiations, organizational forms and institutional arrangements. Being theoretically inspired by the 'technology enactment framework', we propose an approach for framing the design of participatory technology projects at the local governance level, with implications for both theory and practice.

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1. Introduction

Within recent years there has been a marked growth in interest in the concept of 'openness' in various organizational and institutional contexts (Chesbrough, 2003; von Hippel, 2005). In the government realm, openness has gained significant momentum and numerous scholars and policy makers have documented the need to open up the boundaries and allow broader involvement in the form of 'participatory governance', 'integrated governance', 'associational democracy', 'networked governance' 'civic participation', 'collaborative public management' and 'deliberative democracy', just to name a few terms. Hardt and Negri (2004:340) characteristically say that an open approach to understanding democracy resembles "an open-source society, that is, a society whose source code is revealed so that we all can work collaboratively to solve its bugs and create new, better social programs". The Open Government Partnership (OGP) initiative of the 57-member countries is a manifestation of the importance openness has had in the political agenda. The participating countries have made over 1000 commitments to make their governments more open and accountable,¹ which in turn is expected to press local politicians and civil servants to deliver better services (Goldstein, 2013).

The emergent governance mechanisms that this shift has brought about, have also allowed individuals to identify issues of importance, as well as to provide solutions. Powered by widespread and increasing access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), crowdsourcing has been extensively used to track, report, and

coordinate efforts in the context of natural disasters, civil wars and human rights abuses in Haiti, Pakistan, Libya and Kenya (Bott, Gigler & Young, 2014:110). For instance, Ushahidi is one of the most important crowdsourcing platforms where people can provide crisis information, FixMyStreet allows individuals to bring problems to local authorities' attention, while Janaagraha, an Indian NGO, invites the crowdsourcing of bribery incidents.

Through the theoretical lens of the 'technology enactment framework' (TEF), we draw on the governance and open innovation in the public sector literature streams and examine the nuances of a shift towards openness in Luanshya, a town in Sub-Saharan Africa. The study presents an approach that highlights the importance of engaging citizens and the local community in designing technologies introduced by local authorities in the context of a development country without any prior experience in e-governance or any similar projects. If we look at the core open innovation processes as proposed by Gassmann and Enkel (2004), the study presents an outside-in (inbound) process whereby externals – namely citizens and other stakeholders – become actively involved in local governance. More specifically, the objective of the project has been described by the local authorities as follows: "To create an online space for Luanshya Municipal Council, citizens, public and private organizations, NGOs and anyone having an interest in the town to interact in meaningful and constructive ways for the benefit of the community as a whole". Instead of focusing on the implementation phase and how citizens/users adopt technologies after they have been introduced as objective artifacts, we rather explore how actors enact openness already in the design phase. The main question that arises is formulated as follows: How have actors enacted an open technology at the local governance level?

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¹ <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/about>.

Rather than simply replicating a western approach of co-creation and open innovation in an African country, locals have been invited to express their needs and wishes, which have been subsequently embodied in the technology. Such an intervention is not to be considered as a deterministic approach implying that a technological construct per se would bring openness and consequently social value, but the focus should be placed on the negotiations that happen when locals are engaged in the design process. By using the technology enactment framework as the theoretical lens to make sense of the phenomenon and empirical data, we propose an approach for framing the design of participatory technology projects at the local governance level, a contribution that can be further employed both by researchers and practitioners.

Before turning to the core of the argument, in the following section we introduce relevant literature streams, namely the participatory agenda, open innovation in the public sector and the use of ICT in the era of participation. The concepts discussed present the building blocks that will help us better understand the transition towards openness and participation with an emphasis on the role of technology. The technology enactment framework is then presented followed by a description of the research setting and methodology. Then the empirical material is presented and discussed in light of enactment theory and conclusions are drawn.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Citizens' involvement: the participatory agenda

Innovation in the public sector with the aim to create value for society, although not a new idea, has lately attracted much attention mainly because of the incorporation of the citizen in the innovation process (Szkuta, Pizzicannella, & Osimo, 2014). Yang and Pandey (2011) remind us that wondering 'how to make citizen involvement work' is nothing new, as it was in the late 1970s when Checkoway and Van Til (1978) asked similar questions such as, "in what ways does participation make a difference in the decisions and policy outcomes of government, and what kind of difference?" (p.35)". Developing methods and processes that support citizen participation towards democratization dates even earlier, back to the late 1960s and early 1970s (Geurts & Mayer, 1996; Glenn, 2003; Rask, 2013). Following the era of New Public Management (NPM), dating from the mid-1980s, the term governance made its appearance in the literature in the 1990s (Kooiman, 1993) to epitomize a transformation from traditional forms to new modes of problem solving and decision making (Fischer, 2006). March and Olsen (1995:26) describe governance as the "rights, rules, preferences and resources that structure political outcomes", a definition which moves beyond considering governments as the sole subjects of power.

The participatory agenda in developing countries was introduced with expectations to improve public service delivery (Andersson, 2004; Baiocchi, 2003; Ostrom, 1996), empower citizens, deepen democracy and increase local government responsiveness and accountability (Andersson & van Laerhoven, 2007; Fizbein, 1997; Goldfrank, 2002). Participatory theorists argue that meaningful citizen participation is expected to lead to better decision making, as well as facilitate social stability by developing a sense of community, increasing collective decision making, and promoting acceptance and respect of the governance process (Callahan, 2007). The rhetoric used in the governance discourse in general includes statements about an 'enabling' state, 'steering' not 'rowing' (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992), whereby new forms of non-hierarchical, de-central, co-operative and participatory frameworks replace top-down regimes (Bora & Hausendorf, 2006).

Based on these premises, the United Nations developed the 'Engaged Governance' framework with the aim to involve civil society groups in decision-making structures (Kpessa, 2011), what has been also coined as participatory governance. This latter term encompasses the mechanisms that facilitate participation of citizens in public policy (Andersson & van Laerhoven, 2007; Speer, 2012). Ackerman and Fishkin (2004:447) contend that "the best way to tap into the energy

of society is through co-governance, which involves inviting social actors to participate in the core activities of the state". In this vein, 'deliberative democracy' (Cohen, 1989) draws our attention to the importance of pluralism of values; the existence of an open deliberation as a source of policy legitimacy and the equal opportunities to propose, criticize, or support policy ideas (Kpessa, 2011). All these liberating terms/forms of participating are founded on the premises that more voices need to be considered at the local and global level.

2.2. Open innovation in the public sector

This pluralism through civic participation and the transition from hierarchical and top-down government to more participatory forms has also inspired a growing number of public sector organizations to adopt open innovation principles (an example is Nesta's activities and projects). Open Innovation as a management paradigm that favors the transcending of pre-defined boundaries refers to opening up the innovation process so that innovations can emerge through non-traditional mechanisms and in many cases through non-anticipated channels, what Möslin (2013:p.71) calls 'peripheral inside innovators' or 'outside innovators'. Peripheral inside innovators are insightful employees for whom innovation is not part of their job description; while outside innovators are creative customers, suppliers, value creation partners, universities, institutional research departments and other units that reside outside the boundaries of the focal organization. This latter category also incorporates the practice of crowdsourcing, a concept that has been popularized by Jeff Howe and Mark Robinson in a Wired article. According to Howe (2006) crowdsourcing can be understood as "the act of a company or institution taking a function once performed by employees and outsourcing it to an undefined (and generally large) network of people in the form of an open call".

If we make a parallel with the public sector, we realize that citizens' involvement and participatory governance are closely related to the intrinsic principles of open innovation and crowdsourcing. In fact we can describe open innovation in the public sector as the process during which outside innovators (citizens, private sector, universities etc.) participate in government's projects, decision-making and strategy formation towards fostering innovation and social value. Even though the most popular stories of open innovation are case studies within large corporations (such as Procter & Gamble or General Electric) there is an emerging stream that focuses on open social innovation (Chesbrough & Di Minin, 2014) and open innovation in the public sector (e.g. Seltzer & Mahmoudi, 2012; Clark, Brudney, & Jang, 2013; Budhathoki & Haythornthwaite, 2013; Mergel & Desouza, 2013). Notable examples include the identification of problems and incidents by citizens (e.g. Fixmystreet.com, Janaagraha, Change By Us), invitations to solve empirical problems (e.g. the President's Save Award and several calls by NASA on the InnoCentive platform), ideation contests and tasking 'the crowd' with analyzing large amounts of information (e.g. Open Street Map project, the Peer to Patent initiative).²

2.3. ICT in the public sector in the era of participation

Not surprisingly, the role of ICTs in nurturing participatory governance and open innovation has been integral. Government 2.0, Government as a Platform and 'We-government' denote the opening up of governmental boundaries for other stakeholders to participate on platforms inspired by Web 2.0 technologies. Government 2.0 is presented as a new way to describe how these technologies can facilitate the socialization of government services, processes, and data (DiMaio, 2009; Nam, 2012; O'Reilly, 2010). Web 2.0 technologies in government include among others social networking websites (e.g. Facebook), micro-blogging (e.g. Twitter), multimedia sharing (e.g. YouTube),

² For a typology of crowdsourcing types in the public sector, please refer to Brabham (2013).

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