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Who will free us from 'service delivery'? Why a supposed solution is a problem

Significance:

In this Commentary, I challenge the conventional wisdom which sees 'service delivery' as the core task of democratic government. I argue that this view has devalued the role of citizens and prompted widespread dissatisfaction with government. The Commentary therefore points towards a fundamental rethink of government's purpose, which, if adopted, should generate new approaches which place the citizen at the heart of governance.

Few phrases are as popular when South Africans discuss government as 'service delivery'. It is assumed to be the prime purpose of governing. Its lack is said to be behind every township protest. There is some debate on how to achieve it, but none about whether to strive for it.

There are understandable reasons for this. A core feature of the apartheid system was gross inequality in the provision of public services. The suburbs in which whites lived were well served, while segregated black townships were denied basic services, initially because most black people were meant to leave the cities for rural areas – this lack of basic urban services was a core cause of the urban rebellion against apartheid. It also forced many people to rely on unauthorised services, which posed problems for the effectiveness of the state after democracy was achieved. It follows from this that a democratic government should be expected to provide the services to the majority which apartheid did not.

It is also widely agreed that South Africans, particularly the majority who apartheid dominated, do not receive the public service to which citizens of a democracy are entitled. This has prompted a distrust in the government's willingness and ability to serve the people, which is expressed in the public debate as a demand for 'service delivery'.

But 'service delivery' is not a self-evident good. On the contrary, the phrase and the thinking which produced it express a deeply undemocratic view of the relationship between the government and citizens. While its frequent use is understandable, it also makes it more difficult to achieve development goals and is the cause of much citizen dissatisfaction with government, particularly its local variety.

Degrading citizenship

The core of the democratic idea is that the people are meant to govern. This is justified because democratic thought holds that all adults are able to decide what they need and so no person, regardless of their presumed expertise, has a greater right to decide on issues affecting them than any other.[1] Because the people cannot govern directly, they establish governments. But the government is the servant of the people.

This principle is denied by 'service delivery'. It portrays the government as a 'deliverer' and the people as receivers, much like consumers in the marketplace. The people can complain when what they need is not 'delivered'. But, like consumers, they do not decide what is delivered and how it is prepared for delivery. Citizens who are relegated to recipients of delivery are worse off than consumers as they cannot choose to opt out of 'delivery' or switch to another 'deliverer' – they cannot choose not to be governed.

In 'service delivery', the government does not serve the people – it provides for them that which they are assumed to need. Citizens are not decision-makers – they are recipients of the decisions of others. They do not act but are acted upon by the 'deliverers' of service. 'Delivery' is a technical task, not the product of a relationship founded on listening and responding. It places the government over the citizenry rather than at its service. And so the concern for 'delivery' inevitably assumes a style of government which currently prevails in much of the ostensibly democratic world – one in which relatively small groups of technically qualified people decide for everyone else what the government should offer citizens and how it should offer it. If the task is purely technical, it requires people with the right training, not those who listen to citizens. Listening is an obstacle to 'delivery' because it gives credence to the view of people considered unqualified to decide what is needed.

'Service delivery' imposes a new minority rule in which the few decide for the many. At best, it reflects the 'democratic elitist' view[2] that there is a contradiction between democratic government and citizen participation[3]. Because the people do not know what the government should do and how it should do it, this view holds; democracy will collapse if the people decide because elected governments will be unable to perform the tasks required of them. Adherents of this view insist that they are democrats because they believe that the people should choose who decides for them. But they insist that this very limited right to choose will not endure if citizens insist on taking government decisions.

This view is far more a prejudice than a theory of government. There is no 'objective' measure of which policies are best for society – choices are products of our interests and values and so are always subjective. People know what their interests are and the Nobel laureate's view of what is right and good is not intrinsically better than that of the office cleaner. Unlike democratic thought, this view assumes that some of us are better than others, and it is the view which underpins 'service delivery'.

The democratic view sees the government's role as 'public service', not 'delivery'. This assumes that it is the government's function to serve citizens. The people are no longer recipients, they are the source of authority and so of decision-making. A government which serves, rather than delivers, recognises that it is the citizenry which is in charge – officials, elected or not, become what democratic principle insists that they are, public servants.

To insist on 'public service' is not to deny that governments need technical knowledge to perform their functions. Nor does it make the mistake of influential development approaches which expect citizens to choose the techniques needed to serve them.[4] Few of us are experts in public finance or the technical requirements of bulk infrastructure. Even fewer have the time or inclination to decide exactly how government technicians should meet our needs. But democracy requires that technical skills are used to implement democratic decisions, not to substitute for them. The people, through their representatives, decide what government should do and the technicians use their knowledge to do it.

The 'service delivery' approach is elitist, not because it assumes that technical knowledge is needed, but because it requires that those who possess it decide for society, rather than placing their knowledge at its service. 'Service delivery' downgrades elected representatives from decision-makers reflecting the will of the people to, at best, monitors of whether and how technicians 'deliver' services.

Imposing needs

Some imbued with zeal for 'service delivery' would dismiss this argument as theorising at the citizenry's expense. Even if 'service delivery' falls foul of democratic principle, why complain if it meets needs? But it does not meet needs – it is as flawed in practice as it is in theory.

Repeatedly since 1994, development efforts in South Africa have been limited by a gulf between what the government initiates – inevitably on the advice of 'service delivery' technicians – and what citizens who are meant to benefit want.[5] Because they do not listen to the citizens who they hope to benefit, the 'deliverers' often misread what the recipients of 'delivery' want and so their plans remain unrealisable.

The many examples will not be detailed in full here. But in the early 1990s, a core preoccupation of housing policy technicians, expressed in the work of the National Housing Forum, was how to ensure access to mortgage finance for residents of townships and shack settlements.[6] But the intended beneficiaries wanted nothing to do with mortgages, which they associated with losing their homes because they could not keep up with payments.[7] So, much time and effort were wasted negotiating how to 'deliver' to citizens what they did not want. At about the same time, mass electrification efforts assumed that people who had been denied electricity would, if offered it, replace all their sources of heating and light with electrical alternatives. They did not – research later showed that the assumption was based purely on abstract reasoning which simply did not inquire into the concrete choices facing householders.[8]

In both cases, 'service delivery' meant implementing the abstract reasoning of technicians, even though it neither reflected the choices nor suited the circumstances of those who were meant to benefit. This was a consequence of relying on technical knowledge and insights rather than hearing and responding to the voices of the citizenry. It made 'service delivery' a failure on its own terms – it failed to ensure the efficient programmes which technical expertise purports to offer because society's needs can only be established by listening carefully to the diverse voices of the people and allowing a democratic contest between ideas.

The housing example is also important because the forum was not only a gathering of development technicians, it also brought together a broad range of interests and was widely praised precisely because it was seen to be inclusive and broadly representative. That this forum should focus on a 'solution' based on fashionable theorising rather than an accurate reading of citizen need showed how deeply embedded the 'service delivery' view is among the country's elites. It remains so today.

Since the early 1990s, development policy has repeatedly relied on the assumptions of technicians, not the expressed needs and wishes of citizens. This is why research shows that by far the most effective anti-poverty measure since 1994 has been social grants[9] which have stimulated local economies and are used by recipients to generate local economic activity[10]. They are often stigmatised as sources of 'dependency' but are in reality sources of popular empowerment because they enable people to make choices. One reason for the stigmatisation is that grants contradict the assumptions of 'service delivery' because they enable citizens who receive them to make their own choices rather than living with the consequences of the decisions of 'service deliverers'.

Imposing views

'Service delivery' also muzzles the voices of most citizens.

It was noted earlier that township demonstrations are repeatedly labelled 'service delivery protests' because it is assumed that participants are demanding 'delivery'. But it is more accurate to see the demonstrations as protests against 'service delivery'.

Portraying demonstrations as demands for 'delivery' often silences participants, although it purports to give them voice. Simply labelling an event in this way absolves the journalists, commentators and politicians who use it of the bother of finding out what people really want. It can also distort what they want by filtering it through the lens of 'service delivery' when there are more accurate ways of understanding their concerns.

Citizens who complain about a lack of electricity or water are not necessarily demanding 'service delivery'. They are not necessarily insisting that the government deploy its technical skills to impose solutions on them. They might be demanding that the authorities listen carefully to their needs.

Evidence supports this view. Studies of why people protest present a far more complicated picture than the blanket 'service delivery' explanation.[11] In some cases, it could be argued that protesters are demanding not that they receive 'service delivery' but that they be freed from it. In one, technicians decided that 'service delivery' would be more effective if some residents of a shack settlement were removed from their homes. The affected householders became understandably angry and took to the streets in protest.[12] 'Service delivery' threatened their right to shelter and so they wanted to escape it. Restrictions imposed on small traders, so that they do not trade in places where their presence interferes with the intentions of planners, can also become a cause for protest[13]; here too, the reason for demonstrations is not a desire for 'service delivery' but to escape it.

Even if we were to assume, wrongly, that everyone who wants better services really wants 'service delivery', not all protests are a demand for improved services. If the media and commentators need a blanket explanation for why people take to the streets, the more credible phrase would be that these are protests by people who believe they are not heard. And they will not be heard as long as 'service delivery' takes precedence over public service.

Assuming that they want 'delivery' silences people in townships by assuming that they share the world view of the reporter or commentator using the phrase. People may also be silenced even as they seem to be heard. The media may appear to give voice to protestors or to aggrieved citizens. But the questions posed to demonstrators ensure that they offer only a litany of grievances about inadequate services. There is no attempt to learn why particular protests happen at particular places at particular times, even less to discern the choices protestors would make if they did enjoy a say in how the places in which they live would be served. The litany neatly reinforces suburban views of government's role and ensures that the few are heard through the voices of the many.

When middle-class citizens protest (very occasionally by taking to the streets but far more often by signing petitions or lobbying in other ways) their protests are not dismissed by a catch-all phrase – their grievances are described[14] and so they are heard. 'Service delivery protestors' are not. Trade unions, despite strong biases against them[15], are also likely to be heard in a way which is denied to citizens whose concerns are dissolved in the blanket phrase 'service delivery.'

The wrong cure

If 'service delivery' is what people expect of democratic government, the solution lies in more technically efficient government institutions.

'Service delivery' is so popular a term because this is precisely how governing is seen in South Africa and many other countries. Government's failure to win the approval of citizens is said to stem from its lack of capacity[16], which is always explicitly or implicitly understood as technical capacity. The 'solution' is, therefore, to enhance technical capability. This view is popular, not only among journalists and commentators, but also among aid donors and the non-governmental organisations they support.[17]

It may also be the preferred approach of the government. Some of this thinking underpins its District Development Model which assumes that efficiency will be enhanced if local, provincial, and national government tackle key tasks jointly. While the language which justifies this model talks of the benefits each sphere of government can derive from working with the others[18], it has been justified as a means of rectifying the weaknesses of local government in particular. The unstated assumption is that municipalities can improve their ability to perform technical tasks by learning from the other spheres, whose technical competence is assumed to be superior.

But, if we acknowledge that the problem is not technical capacity but a refusal to listen, enhancing 'service delivery' will not improve the way people are governed. Because 'service delivery' exalts the technical function of the government and diminishes the agency of the citizen, and citizens hold local government in low esteem not because it fails to 'deliver' to them, but because it will not listen to them, the solution lies in adopting a 'public service' approach in which the citizen is the thinking, acting agent and government is its servant, whose role is to turn what most citizens want into reality. The solution would then lie not in enhancing the government's technical capacity but in insisting that it discharge its democratic responsibilities to the people by listening to them and implementing the preferences of the majority on any particular issue.

It is also worth noting that knowing what is technically efficient is not as straightforward as advocates of 'service delivery' assume it to be. 'Efficiency' is a measure of capacity to realise goals. But who decides what the goals are? The question is political, not technical – what citizens want from government depends on their interests and values and there is no 'objective' way of determining who is 'right' and who is 'wrong'. And so, citizens are likely to be satisfied with governments which are pursuing goals which they share in a manner which responds to their needs. In the effort to achieve this, technical efficacy is secondary, willingness to listen and respond to citizen voice primary. Technical skills enable what is heard to be implemented but they are not a substitute for responding to citizens.

The approach most consistent with democratic principles is also that which is most likely to address the problem 'service delivery' is meant to solve – citizen alienation from government. A commitment to 'public service' rather than 'service delivery' is most likely to convince most citizens that government exists to serve them and so to mend the broken link, in just about all democracies including South Africa, between citizens and those who purport to serve them.

Declarations

I have no competing interests to declare. I have no AI or LLM use to declare.

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