

BOOSTING CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT in Urban Governance THROUGH STORYTELLING



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
STORYTELLING AS A TOOL FOR EFFECTIVE URBAN GOVERNANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA	3
STORYTELLING AND INCLUSIVE URBAN DEVELOPMENT	8
MEASURING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF STORYTELLING IN PUBLIC PARTICIPATION	10
THE WAY FORWARD	10
REFERENCES	11

INTRODUCTION

Citizen engagement refers to the active participation of citizens in the decision-making processes that affect their lives (Mlambo et al., 2019). Effective citizen engagement is crucial for the successful governance of cities, and so the government should empower citizens to have a voice in shaping their cities (Buccus, 2021). When citizens participate in policy-making projects, the result is increased public engagement and a higher degree of legitimacy in decision-making, contributing to deepening democracy (Waddington et al., 2019). In South Africa, the importance of active citizen participation is recognised in the Constitution and subsequent legislation and policies. The engagement of citizens is crucial for addressing the inequality, poverty and service delivery challenges facing cities (Dube et al., 2021), but barriers remain.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Several interlinked barriers prevent effective citizen engagement in cities, including the following.

- 1** Low levels of trust between citizens and government. A lack of trust in the information received from the government may lead to citizens not participating in decision-making processes.
- 2** Limited access to information. Many citizens, especially those in marginalised communities, may not have access to accurate and timely information about government policies and initiatives (Fung, 2015).
- 3** Diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Language barriers may make it difficult for citizens to understand official communications and participate fully in decision-making processes.
- 4** Insufficient resources and capacity. Governments may lack the resources and capacity to effectively engage citizens (e.g., technology infrastructure and trained multilingual facilitators).

For governments seeking to communicate and engage effectively with citizens, storytelling offers a way of overcoming these barriers because it resonates with people on a personal level.

THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

Storytelling has long been a powerful tool for conveying information, engaging audiences, evoking emotions and inspiring action. It encourages participation and collaboration, creating a sense of connection, empathy and shared understanding among community members. It also helps to build trust and strengthen community relationships as individuals communicate their experiences, values and perspectives in a way that resonates with others. Sharing experiences creates a sense of transparency, openness and vulnerability, leading to deeper connections. Indeed, community members who understand each other's perspectives, struggles, successes and aspirations are more likely to cooperate, get involved and provide support. Stories can be a powerful catalyst for sparking interest, generating enthusiasm and mobilising people to participate in community initiatives, projects and activities.

Storytelling is also a tool for promoting inclusivity and diversity through amplifying the voices and experiences of marginalised or underrepresented groups, raising awareness about social issues, and promoting empathy and understanding. Stories have the potential to empower individuals by enhancing their ability to communicate ideas and engage effectively with others. They enable individuals to challenge stereotypes, break down barriers and create a more welcoming and supportive space for all community members to participate and contribute. People form stronger relationships and come together to work towards a shared vision of a more vibrant, inclusive and thriving society.

Storytelling can be leveraged to enhance citizen engagement in South African cities (Mlambo et al., 2019). This paper uses case studies to illustrate the effectiveness of storytelling for urban governance, providing concrete examples of how abstract concepts are made more relatable and tangible for the public. Success stories offer robust evidence of the effectiveness of municipal initiatives, showcasing positive outcomes that demonstrate the value of taxpayer dollars at work and helping to build trust in government institutions.

STORYTELLING AS A TOOL FOR EFFECTIVE URBAN GOVERNANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

One way of leveraging storytelling in South African cities is to use a dialogical approach to public participation that emphasises open and inclusive dialogue between citizens and the municipality, allowing for meaningful participation and collaboration in decision-making (Dube et al., 2021). By incorporating storytelling into a dialogical approach, the municipality can create narratives that reflect the realities and perspectives of citizens, which can then be shared through social media, community radio stations and local newsletters. Citizens who listen to these stories can relate to the experiences and challenges described by their fellow community members, creating a sense of empathy and connection. This, in turn, builds trust between citizens and government officials, humanises the decision-making process and shows that the municipality values the voices and experiences of its citizens.

In South Africa, a country with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, language barriers can make it difficult for citizens to understand and participate fully in decision-making processes. Storytelling helps to bridge divides and promote social cohesion, enabling people to understand historical injustices and inequalities and to participate in decision-making processes. The sharing of personal stories and narratives by citizens from different backgrounds breaks down barriers and fosters empathy and understanding. This can help build trust between communities and government institutions, leading to more effective collaborations and partnerships in addressing urban challenges.

Furthermore, storytelling can be used as a critical reflection and dialogue, allowing citizens to analyse urban issues and engage in meaningful discussions. This can result in the identification of innovative solutions and the generation of new ideas for urban development. By using storytelling effectively, municipalities in South Africa can also play a pivotal role in enhancing entrepreneurship development in their respective areas (Madzivhandila & Musara, 2020).

COMMUNICATE COMPLEX ISSUES AND INFORMATION

To address the issue of limited access to information, the government can tell stories that provide accurate and accessible information about government policies, initiatives and opportunities for citizen engagement (Khambule & Proches, 2018). Storytelling means that cities can make complex issues more relatable and understandable when communicating urban policies and initiatives to the public, thereby creating deeper connections and broader accessibility to all citizens, especially those from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Buccus, 2021).

Case Study: eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality

During the flood disaster in the eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality, storytelling was a powerful tool for communicating with citizens and providing them with information and updates. The municipality shared real-life accounts of individuals affected by the disaster, highlighting their struggles and experiences to evoke empathy and understanding among the community.

Through various communication channels, such as social media, press releases and community meetings, the municipality shared stories of resilience, community support and the heroic efforts of emergency responders. These stories informed citizens about the current situation and inspired community hope and solidarity.

By humanising the disaster's impact through storytelling, the municipality could connect deeply with citizens and convey important messages about safety measures, evacuation procedures and relief efforts. These stories helped to break down complex information into relatable and digestible narratives, making it easier for citizens to understand and respond effectively to the crisis.

EDUCATE CITIZENS ABOUT RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Storytelling can serve as a tool for educating citizens about their rights, responsibilities and the importance of active citizenship. Citizens can understand the impact of their actions on the city and are motivated to participate actively in civic processes. Storytelling enhances citizen engagement and promotes civic involvement by fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment among citizens, encouraging them to contribute to their cities' development actively. Incorporating diverse narratives and perspectives into policy-making and planning leads to more inclusive and equitable urban governance.

Case Study: City of Tshwane

The City of Tshwane successfully leveraged storytelling through social media and live outreach campaigns in its Tshwane ya Tima revenue collection campaign. The city combined compelling narratives and engaging content to communicate effectively to its residents about the importance of paying their municipal bills on time.

The city used social media platforms, such as Facebook and X, to share stories of the positive impact of paying municipal bills on time. By showcasing real-life examples of how revenue collection directly contributes to providing basic services to citizens and improving public services and infrastructure, the city was able to connect with residents on a more emotional level and motivate them to fulfil their financial obligations.

The city also organised live outreach campaigns in various regions, where officials interacted face-to-face with residents and shared stories of how revenue collection benefits the community. Events included community workshops, door-to-door visits, and Zoom meetings, with city officials and representatives answering residents' questions and providing information on the importance of paying municipal bills on time.

The city's Tshwane ya Tima revenue collection campaign raised awareness, fostered community engagement and improved revenue collection rates.

MOBILISE CITIZENS AND FOSTER PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Storytelling can inspire citizens to actively participate in decision-making processes and take ownership of their communities by providing compelling narratives, which highlight the positive impact of citizen engagement and showcase successful community-driven projects. By incorporating diverse narratives that reflect the experiences and perspectives of citizens and different communities, storytelling can create a sense of shared values and consensus, make governance more relatable and accessible, and foster participatory democracy

Case Study: Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality and the City of Cape Town

In recent years, the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality and the City of Cape Town have faced severe water crises, leading to water shortages and urgent conservation measures. In response to these challenges, both municipalities leveraged storytelling as a powerful tool to communicate the gravity of the situation and gain the buy-in of stakeholders.

In Nelson Mandela Bay, municipal officials used storytelling techniques to convey the impact of the water crisis on the community. The municipality created a sense of urgency among stakeholders by sharing personal stories of residents directly affected by the water shortages. The highlighting of the lack of access to clean water and the potential long-term consequences of the crisis mobilised support for conservation efforts and water-saving initiatives.

Similarly, the City of Cape Town used storytelling as a key communication strategy during its water crisis. Through engaging narratives and compelling visuals, the city government raised awareness about the severity of the situation and the need for immediate action. By sharing stories of businesses, schools and individuals that were taking proactive steps to conserve water, the city inspired others to do the same. The city also built momentum for sustainable solutions to the crisis by emphasising the positive impact of water-saving initiatives on the environment and communities.

In both cases, storytelling was crucial in shaping the public narrative around the water crisis and garnering support for conservation efforts. Effectively communicating residents' challenges and the importance of water conservation enabled both municipalities to mobilise stakeholders and drive meaningful change, raise awareness, build empathy and inspire action in the face of a pressing environmental issue.

BUILD A SHARED VISION AND VALUES AMONG DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

Storytelling can promote social cohesion by highlighting everyday experiences and shared values among citizens. When citizens share stories about their experiences and perspectives, they develop a sense of empathy and understanding towards others, leading to stronger community bonds. By incorporating traditional storytelling methods, such as oral narratives and local folklore, into urban governance practices, South African cities can honour, celebrate and preserve their diverse cultural heritage and, in so doing, create a sense of pride and connection among citizens (Erkan, 2018). Storytelling also has the potential to revitalise and preserve indigenous knowledge and practices in South African cities by sharing stories about local traditions, cultural practices and environmental knowledge.

Case Study: Mandela Bay Development Agency (Development Agency of Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality)

The Mandela Bay Development Agency (MBDA) has successfully integrated storytelling into its projects, creating a sense of ownership and pride among communities and fostering a deeper connection with the areas undergoing redevelopment. One example is the Route 67 heritage trail, which celebrates Nelson Mandela's 67 years of service to South Africa and consists of 67 art pieces symbolising critical moments in Mandela's life. The MBDA used storytelling to bring each art piece to life, providing context and meaning to visitors and residents alike and creating a powerful and engaging experience while uplifting the surrounding community.

Another example is the Donkin Reserve, a historical site with a rich heritage. The MBDA used storytelling to highlight the site's significance and engage visitors, creating a sense of place and greater appreciation for the area's history and culture. The Donkin Reserve is brought to life through guided tours, interpretive signage, and interactive exhibits, making it a must-visit destination for tourists and locals alike.

The MBDA has used storytelling in its urban redevelopment projects to create vibrant, engaging, and culturally rich spaces. It has transformed neglected areas into thriving hubs of activity and creativity that connect with communities and inspire a sense of pride and belonging among residents.

STORYTELLING AND INCLUSIVE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Inclusive urban development is a vital component of creating vibrant and thriving cities that cater to the needs of all residents, regardless of their background or socio-economic status. Storytelling techniques can effectively cultivate inclusivity and community among diverse populations within urban spaces.

In the context of South African cities, which are characterised by division and inequalities, storytelling can be particularly impactful in promoting social cohesion and inclusion by giving voice to marginalised communities and providing a platform for sharing personal experiences. Stories which address historical injustices and highlight the importance of equity in urban planning and decision-making processes can lead to support from different stakeholders, including the media and opponents, and to the mainstream adoption of a narrative that promotes urban development and positive change.

For centuries, storytelling has been used to share experiences, traditions and values across generations and cultures. By incorporating storytelling techniques into urban development initiatives, planners and policy-makers can effectively engage with residents and stakeholders and co-create an inclusive urban environment through dialogue and collaboration.

Planners can gain valuable insights into the needs and aspirations of different communities by encouraging residents to share their personal stories and experiences related to their neighbourhoods. This can help inform decision-making processes, ensure that urban development projects are tailored to meet the diverse needs of residents and create more equitable and inclusive urban spaces that prioritise social justice and equality.

Case Study: Johannesburg Development Agency (Development Agency of the City of Johannesburg)

The Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA) has effectively used storytelling to engage stakeholders, build relationships and communicate the impact of its urban redevelopment projects.

One example is the revitalisation of the Maboneng Precinct in downtown Johannesburg. Using multimedia platforms, such as videos, social media campaigns, and community events, the JDA showcased the transformation of the once-neglected area into a vibrant cultural hub. By sharing the stories of local artists, entrepreneurs, and residents who have benefited from the redevelopment, the JDA was able to highlight the project's positive impact on the community.

Another example is the regeneration of the Newtown Cultural Precinct, where the JDA used storytelling to highlight the area's historical significance and potential for economic growth. The JDA worked with local historians, artists and community members to uncover and share Newtown's rich cultural heritage through exhibitions, guided tours and public art installations. These stories celebrated the past and inspired hope for the precinct's future as a thriving cultural destination.

In both cases, the JDA's storytelling approach raised awareness about its urban redevelopment projects and fostered a sense of stakeholder pride and ownership. By showcasing the human stories behind the infrastructure developments, the JDA demonstrated the social impact of its projects and built trust with the community.

Stories offer a way for urban developers to break down barriers and promote a sense of solidarity and connection among diverse populations. In turn, this can lead to a more inclusive and cohesive urban community that values diversity and celebrates the unique contributions of all its members, resulting in more sustainable and equitable urban development. However, while storytelling has numerous benefits for citizen engagement in South African cities, several challenges exist. These include limited access to technology in specific communities, which may hinder the implementation of digital storytelling initiatives, and language and cultural differences that could result in communication barriers. Such challenges can be countered through forming partnerships with local organisations and institutions (digital technology and training for communities) and incorporating local languages and cultural elements into storytelling. The power of social media can also be leveraged to expand the reach of storytelling initiatives and enable citizens to share their stories on a broader scale.

MEASURING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF STORYTELLING IN PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The effectiveness of storytelling can be assessed through various indicators, such as changes in citizen engagement levels in public opinion and perception and tangible outcomes (e.g., policy changes).

- 1** The level of active involvement, feedback and contribution by citizens can be measured through surveys, interviews and observations of citizen interactions to assess the impact of storytelling in generating interest, promoting dialogue and encouraging citizen participation in decision-making processes (Michels & Graaf, 2010).
- 2** The influence of storytelling on public opinion, attitudes, and perceptions of urban development policies and initiatives can be measured through pre-and post-surveys, focus groups and analysis of social media platforms to track changes in sentiment and public discourse around urban development issues.
- 3** The impact on policy and tangible outcomes can be measured by comparing the actions and decisions taken by government officials before and after the implementation of storytelling initiatives.

THE WAY FORWARD

South African cities can leverage storytelling to engage with citizens and create an enabling environment that supports active public participation, encourages people to listen to diverse opinions and contributes to a higher degree of legitimacy in decision-making. The results would include more inclusive and effective urban policies that address the needs and concerns of diverse communities, an enhanced overall quality of urban life, a sense of ownership and empowerment among citizens, and greater collaboration and cooperation between governments, businesses and civil society.

However, despite the many positive impacts on democracy and urban policy, implementing storytelling as a tool for citizen engagement has some limitations. Additional interventions would be needed to address bottlenecks in service delivery, ensure representation of all relevant groups and interests, counter any potential biases and limitations of storytelling as a communications tool, and guarantee an implementation process with rigorous impact evaluations and transparent reporting (Waddington et al., 2019).

Citizen engagement through storytelling could be further enhanced by using digital platforms and technology (Li, 2015), including developing mobile applications or online platforms, which allow citizens to share their stories and experiences easily, and providing interactive storytelling tools, such as multimedia presentations or virtual reality experiences.

Further research is needed on the impact of storytelling interventions on women and other vulnerable groups within communities, as well as on citizens in general and on addressing specific urban development challenges in South African cities, such as housing inequality, transportation accessibility and environmental sustainability.

- Follow-up studies could be conducted to determine how long the attitudes, behaviours, and engagement levels lasted.
- The implementation and impact of policies could be tracked to explore the long-term effects of storytelling initiatives on citizen engagement and urban policy outcomes and to assess the sustainability and scalability of storytelling initiatives (Li, 2015; Michels & Graf, 2010)

This additional research would provide valuable insights into how storytelling can be leveraged to address South African cities' unique needs and challenges. It would ultimately enhance citizen engagement and improve urban policy outcomes (Michels & Graaf, 2010), leading to more inclusive and effective urban policies that address the needs and concerns of all citizens.

REFERENCES

- Buccus I. 2021. Rebuilding active public participation after the COVID-19 era: The South African case, *Journal of Public Affairs*, 21(4): e2720. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2720>.
- Dube CK, Mnguni L and Tschudin A. 2021. Peacebuilding through public participation mechanisms in local government: The case study of Mbizana Local Municipality, South Africa, *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 2(2): 242–255. <https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.68>.
- Erkan Y. 2018. The way forward with historic urban landscape approach towards sustainable urban development, *Built Heritage*, 2: 82–89. <https://doi.org/10.1186/bf03545686>.
- Fung A. 2015. Putting the public back into governance: The challenges of citizen participation and its future, *Public Administration Review*, 75(4): 513–522. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12361>.
- Khambule I and Proches CG. 2018. Exploring the role of social dialogue in local economic development: A case of a South African Local Economic Development Agency, *Progress in Development Studies*, 19(1): 36–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464993418806126>.
- Li M. 2015. Governance of citizen participation and its related concepts: A review of literature, *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, 61: 99–104. [t.ly/7uTDQ](https://doi.org/10.1177/1464993418806126).
- Madzivhandila TS and Musara M. 2020. Taking responsibility for entrepreneurship development in South Africa: The role of local municipalities, *Local Economy*, 35(3): 257–268. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269094220922820>.
- Michels A and Graaf L. 2010. Examining citizen participation: Local participatory policy-making and democracy, *Local Government Studies*, 36(4): 477–491. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2010.494101>.
- Mlambo VH, Zubane SP and Mlambo DN. 2019. Promoting good governance in Africa: The role of the civil society as a watchdog, *Journal of Public Affairs*, 20(1). <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.1989>.
- Waddington H, Sonnenfeld A, Finetti J, Gaarder M, John D and Stevenson J. 2019. Citizen engagement in public services in low- and middle-income countries: A mixed-methods systematic review of participation, inclusion, transparency and accountability (PITA) initiatives, *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 15(1-2). <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/cl2.1025>.

The South African Cities Network
Joburg Metro Building
16th Floor
158 Civic Boulevard
Braamfontein
2017

(+27) 011 407 6471
info@sacities.net
www.sacities.net

