GSP II Reflection Learning Sharing

Digitalisation of Service Delivery and Citizen Engagement

Capacity Building on Social Media Communication for Improved Citizen Engagement

Communication and access to information are central aspects of participatory and accountable local governments. The South African local government system has progressive legislation on public participation that requires municipalities to consult residents in all major processes and enable them to participate from an informed standpoint.

However, many municipalities operate with a small team and budget for communication. The complex local governance environment and dissatisfaction of many citizens with service delivery makes it difficult for municipal communicators to portray the strengths, plans and achievements of the institution, proactively communicate challenges and constructively deal with critical feedback. From the citizens' perspective the critique remains that meaningful two-way communication and feedback loops are not sufficiently achieved.

The COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing drought crisis strongly elevates the municipal communication function. This context requires an unprecedented level of timely, accurate and useful communication through all available communication channels. Municipalities have become aware that they need to pay stronger attention to meaningful citizen engagement and use digital tools to improve their communication practices.

Overview

Internet- and social media-based communication can improve the outreach, timeliness, and transparency of citizen engagement. Especially social media can help to engage young persons and people with demanding household or professional duties hindering them from attending public meetings. A further advantage is its cost-effectiveness since external design, printing and distribution costs can be considerably reduced.

The challenge for municipalities is to make their existing websites and social media pages more effective communication tools and embed them into a communication strategy that promotes a complementary mix of classical and digital communication methods.

The GSP II reacted to this capacity building need with tailor-made interventions at district and provincial level. An existing government structure called the Local Government Communicators Forum (LGCF) proved an excellent cooperation partner.

What was done

1. **Integration of social media engagement into citizen engagement strategies:**
   - The GSP II partner municipalities received advisory services in revising their public participation strategies and citizen engagement frameworks. The aim was to integrate digital citizen engagement tools into a balanced mixed of communication practices that reaches all parts of the population and leaves no one behind. Part of the intervention was advice on the social media policies and an awareness training for councilors and communication practitioners from the two districts.

2. **Training on social media tools for communicators of partner districts**
   - Demands-based training on social media tools was implemented for the local government communicators of the municipalities falling under the two districts.
   - The training focused on both technical tools for more effective communicationand improved content production and writing technique.

3. **Training organized by the Provincial Local Government Communicators Forums**
   - The LGCF requested the GSP II to organize an initial training on social media engagement in 2019 and an upgrading training in 2021.
   - Due to the positive feedback received from the participating municipalities and the organizing government departments,

the training was replicated in cooperation with the Salga and GCIS in the province of Mpumalanga. The trainings at district and provincial level covered the following topics:

- Understanding the relevance and requirements of social media communication
- Social media tools for visual content production (video, photo, graphic design)
- E-newsletter production
- How to address the information needs of citizens
- How to write compelling and engaging social media content and combine picture and copy
- How to measure the impact of social media posts and improve targeting and outreach
- Learning from good practices of municipal social media engagement as presented by the City of Johannesburg

What was achieved

- The training helped participating municipalities to improve their social media presence and outreach by adopting new approaches, tools, and monitoring practices. The institutions became even more aware that social media engagement is an essential element of municipal communication strategies which requires enhanced expertise, regulation and active contributions from officials and councillors to become a success.
- The participants realized that they could produce visual content combined with succinct, engaging text. They could see that their short videos on municipal addresses and programmes receive much better attention by citizens than text-heavy posts.
- Visual content by the municipalities that provided updates on infrastructure projects received positive feedback from citizens and was commended by the trainers.

The communication team of Chris Hani District Municipality (CHDM) stated:

> " The social media training helped us to improve our practice. The City of Johannesburg which is on another level inspired us to use more visual content to bring across the message. Even though our audience as rural district is a bit more traditional, we started to use humor and fresher language to produce compelling content. We try to reach people where they are and combine traditional and digital communication tools. "

The team from Amatole District Municipality (ADM) noted:

> " For an affordable amount we bought a full license of the video production tool as we found it so handy and use it regularly. We produce videos of addresses, programs, project updates and use them for awareness raising and service delivery information purposes. The support by GSP helped us to advance in implementing our smart district strategy with improved digital communication and customer care practices that reinforce each other. "