

Lesotho Council of NGOs

POLICY BRIEF

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Key Messages

- Community Parliaments are an innovative engagement platform for a dialogue between communities and decision makers on community priorities and Budget allocation decisions.
- Community Parliaments empower communities to demand their rights, be consulted, and have their views incorporated into the development and implementation of Government policies and programs.
- Community Parliaments offer ordinary citizens a platform to identify and prioritise their needs, and present them directly to the relevant Government decision makers.
- Community Parliaments hold Government accountable, because ministries are expected to provide a financial and programmatic update on how they are addressing national challenges.

Lesotho Council of Non-Governmental Organisation is an umbrella organizations for NGOs in Lesotho. It was established in May 1990 with an objective of providing supportive services to the NGO Community. The Council implements this through networking and leadership training and development, information dissemination, capacity building, coordination, advocacy and representation when dealing with the government and the international community.

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Community Parliament as a method of community engagement

Community Parliaments – what are they?

Community Parliaments are an innovative engagement platform which provides space for a dialogue between communities and decision makers on community priorities and Governmental budget allocation decisions. Preliminary meetings are held in each of Lesotho's ten districts. Elected community representatives then come together in Maseru for three days of debate and discussion, structured as a formal session of Parliament.

Community Parliaments are about empowering communities to demand their rights, be consulted and have their views incorporated into the development and implementation of Government policies and programs.

“Sometimes I think I’m not allowed to participate anywhere. But now the fear is gone and I feel free to participate. I am empowered and competent that I can stand up for my rights.”¹

Community Parliaments provide a unique opportunity for Government and ordinary citizens to sit together to understand people's needs and plan how they can be met.

Community Parliaments offer a platform for ordinary citizens to identify their needs, prioritise them, and present them directly to decision makers from different Government Ministries. Community Parliament participants also learn about how the Government makes policy decisions, and how it allocates budget funding.

1. All quotes taken from Denmark Lesotho Network, 2012 *Final Report, Capacity building and advocacy in political Process and decision making*, lumela.dk/wp-content/uploads/Final-Report_DPE-2012.pdf

Community Parliaments are also an opportunity for decision makers, Ministers, Principal Secretaries and other senior government officials, to hear directly from the communities about the most pressing issues for Government action in their areas. The Community Parliament plays an important accountability role, where government ministries are expected to provide a financial and programmatic update on what they are doing to address national challenges.

Process:

Preliminary consultations

Community meetings are held in each of Lesotho's ten regions. During these meeting participants discuss local issues and prioritise three needs or issues to discuss at the Community Parliament. Participants, guided by civil society organisations, then develop questions based on these issues. Participants focus on directly linking their questions to existing Government policies and strategies. This helps participants to hold the Government accountable for existing commitments, because participants expect specific responses from Government representatives.

During these meetings, participants also nominate representatives to the national Community Parliament.

Question presentation ceremony

Community priorities and questions are formally presented to relevant cabinet ministers and senior Government officials. The presentation is made prior to the Community Parliament, to ensure the Government has time to consider the questions and provide detailed responses during the Community Parliament. This improves the accountability function of Community Parliaments, because the Government has no excuse for not substantively answering community questions.

National Community Parliament

The national Community Parliament is a three day event, convened in Maseru, focused on building community capacity, particularly in the regions, (i) to analyse Government policy, (ii) make their views heard and (iii) participate in national policy debates. Better community awareness of Government policies is critical to facilitate the success of decentralization efforts underway in Lesotho. Communities must know they have the right to demand decentralized services, and also

what Government policies exists.

The Annual Community Parliament deliberations consist of:

Day one: Partici-

pants prepare by rehearsing their roles and becoming familiar with parliamentary proceedings, in preparation for the mock parliamentary de-

"I believe it has made a difference to our leaders because they see that people will question them if they don't live up to the expectations"

A history of Community Parliaments in Lesotho

Lesotho's first Community Parliament was held in AME in 2008. There were 75 participants from the communities and some members representing NGOs operating at the National level, and representation from 4 Ministries. Since then, the National Community Parliament has grown, as communities and the Government realize the value of the forum as a way to connect communities and decision makers. Community Parliaments were started by DPE, and as they have grown, have come to include partners such as LCN and TRC.

In 2014, the National Community Parliament was attended by 225 community participants. 12 Civil society organisations were represented. Nine parliamentarians were present throughout the 2014 Community Parliaments, with a number of other parliamentarians attended various sessions over the two days.

The 2014 Community Parliament also had strong representation from Ministers, Principal Secretaries and senior Government officials, indicating decision-makers view the Community Parliament as a valuable forum to engage in a substantive discourse with Communities on development issues. Communities and the Government increasingly value the National Community Parliament as an important feature of Lesotho's political landscape.

bates.

Days two and three: Participants engage in mock parliamentary debates with Ministers and senior Government officials, probing them on their dif-

"We found that it is possible to challenge our leaders to listen to ordinary members of the public"

ferent areas of responsibility and receiving responses.

The advantages of Community Parliaments

A unique way to connect communities and decision makers

Community voices and building capacity

The Community Parliament process is a unique opportunity for communities across Lesotho to have their specific issues and priorities heard at the national level. This opportunity is strengthened through civil society working with Communities to ensure their issues and priorities can reference national documents such as Vision 2020, the National Strategic Development Plan, and other Government policies.

As well as providing opportunities for communities to deliver their priorities directly to decision makers, this process builds community capacity in understanding the relevance of Government policy documents, and how the community can use government policies to demand better outcomes at the local level.

Providing micro and macro views of Lesotho's development priorities

Community Parliaments have now evolved to include a number of civil society umbrella organizations, in addition to community representatives. These groups complement each other: the community representative present issues relevant at a local scale; while the national organisations provide a macro view of national trends, which sets the context for local concerns. This evolution of Community Parliaments means that decision makers are presented with a complete picture of Lesotho's development challenges, which they can check against their own budget and planning decisions.

Timely input into Government budget processes

Community Parliaments are an important forum for communities and civil society to clearly state their priorities, and how this should translate into Government funding decisions. Community Parliaments are typically held in August.

This is intentional; this is when Government ministries complete the review of first quarter budget implementation, and prepare to review and adjust the three year rolling Medium Term Expenditure Framework. Holding the National Community Parliament in August also means that the priorities identified in the Community Parliament can feed into the beginning of the Ministry of Finance's budget cycle for the next year.

It is very important that community views and priorities feed into this process from the beginning. Community Parliaments help facilitate this by bringing community representatives together from across the country. Community Parliaments provide an excellent forum to help ensure that national budget allocations are based on people's essential needs.

As well as providing a forum for communities to voice their priorities to decision makers, Community Parliaments also expose community members to the process of Government funding allocation. This is a valuable component of the Community Parliament methodology. There are a number of areas that Lesotho could focus on to improve development outcomes. There is, however, a limited amount of funding and tough decision must be made on how available funding is prioritized.

Community Parliaments help communities to understand that the Government has a limited pool of funding, so must prioritise its spending. The National Community Parliament also gives communities an opportunity to advocate for their priorities with well developed, evidence-based arguments.

Participants' responses on the effectiveness of Community Parliament as platform of engagement with policy makers.

The most important thing about the National Community Parliament is that participants find value in the process. Participants of every kind, from community representatives, to civil society, to Ministers and senior Government officials regularly endorse the value of the Community Parliament process.

An exit survey of participants in the 2014 National Community Parliament shows that partic-

"Promises were made that our suggestions might be included in the budget"

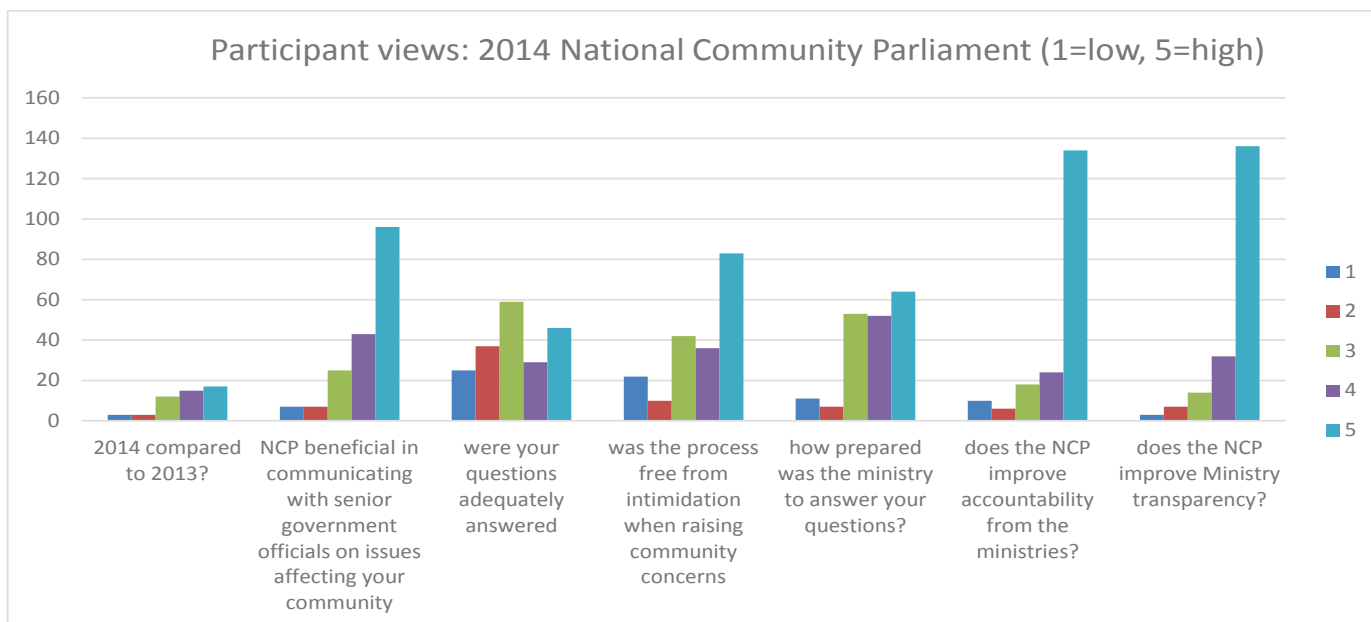


Figure 1. Participants' views on the 2014 National Community Parliament (1=low, 5=high)

Ministers and senior Government officials also endorse the value of the Community Parliament process. Opening the 2014 National Community Parliament, The Hon Matsepo Ramakoae, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Finance echoed sentiments expressed by a number of Ministers by highlighting that other countries want to come to Lesotho to learn how the model works, because it has proven a good way of encouraging open communication between government and communities. The Hon Deputy Minister also reiterated that Community Parliaments should be used as a platform to inform the national budget allocations based on essential needs from respective community councils.

International recognition

Community Parliaments have been attended by delegates from Swaziland. The Swaziland delegates were impressed by the depth and breadth of engagement facilitated by the Community Parliament, and are now investigating how this engagement tool might be applied in Swaziland.

The Denmark Lesotho Network provides support to the National Community Parliament. In their 2012 final report, it commends the ability of the Community Parliament to; (i) Empower communities to address policy makers, (ii) Create a plat-

form for citizen engagement with policy makers, and (iii) Act as an accountability mechanisms between citizens and policy makers.

Recommendations

Community Parliaments are an excellent tool to encourage substantive and reasoned engagement between communities, civil society, and government decision makers. They have been used to great effect in Lesotho, to make communities feel part of the political process, build their capacity in understanding government budgeting and policy decisions, and informing senior government officials of community needs. They also play an important accountability function, where communities expect ministries to report on progress implementing government policies.

The use and reach of Community Parliaments should be increased to take full advantage of this platform to engage communities, and connect communities and decision makers in a meaningful way.

There is a need to convene a post-budget speech Community Parliament, where communities and civil society can interrogate government spending decisions with reference to the issues identified in the pre-budget Community Parliament.

References

Denmark Lesotho Network, 2012 Final Report, Capacity building and advocacy in political Process and decision making, lumela.dk/wp-content/uploads/Final-Report_DPE-2012.pdf

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