The Power of Collaboration

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Is there a problem in your city that you know how to solve? Well, most of the time, the local authorities are the only ones involved in solving these problems, aided by the odd NGO. Regardless, individual residents are rarely included, at least not on a citywide level. As of last year, 54% of the global population lives in urban areas – this means that cities face more issues than ever, but also have a more diverse pool of individuals all capable of suggesting solutions to these issues. Despite this, there is a sort of vacuum between individuals and the alleviation of urban issues, this might be due to the lack of initiative from the public, or perhaps there is a lack of platforms for that sort of exchange. Whatever the reason, the distance does not create an ideal relationship between the people and local authorities.

I recently read an article[1] that documented a certain city that challenged this unspoken tradition. Boston has faced several snow crises annually for the last few winters. In fact, This January, Boston was faced with an onslaught of nearly 9 *billion* cubic feet[2] of snow. Typically, their excess snow is ploughed from the roads and sent to 'snow farms', areas specially designated to house snow during the winter. However the immense volume of snow Boston experienced this past winter far out-measured the capacity of the snow farms, so the local government had to devise an alternate strategy for keeping the roads snow-free. As no suitable ideas came readily to them they did something rather revolutionary: they presented their dilemma to the public and asked for potential solutions. This culminated in various measures taken to relieve the roads of snow and improve road

safety in light of the reduced visibility from the storms. These measures included the mobilisation of part of the National Guard to shovel snow and the temporary transition of many roads from two-way to one-way.

However, the significance lies in the method of reaching these solutions, asking the public for opinions opened up the issue to a virtually limitless reserve of mental resources, from professors in universities, who are at the forefront of research in urban planning, to laymen who may have had an entirely new perspective on the situation. In addition, thanks to modern phenomenon, namely the Internet, each of these individuals has access to a vast ocean of information and will perceive and interpret it differently, leading to incredible potential for information.

I came across another example where this same idea of increasing the immediacy of communication between local authorities and civilians is being experimented with, though in a different way. In Rio de Janeiro, the city government is developing a mobile application to teach the masses to perform very basic, emergency medical procedures. The aim was to make it easy and accessible for anyone to gain basic medical skills, such that, in an emergency, the average citizen would be able to carry out simple measures, which could save lives, while waiting for professional medics to arrive. In a city as large as Rio de Janeiro, population: 6.32 million[3], it is useful for the government to have a platform by which to communicate with the general public.

Moreover, with prevailing technology, these types of systems are also pragmatic. Ideas can be transferred between people in a matter of seconds, and this power could be harnessed to diversify the idea pool authorities have access to when confronting these problems, transferring information straight from the people to the government.

What if these direct exchanges between local authorities and civilians were not so uncommon and intermittent? So the wide gap between local government and locals was not only closed but also open to regular information flows in both directions, allowing a transparent conversation between the people and the government. Theoretically, this could foster an environment where people help the local government solve citywide issues and the local government, in turn, can provide efficient assistance to the public.

In most cities, there are actually many links between the government and the people already, but these links are usually quite indirect. In many cities NGOs are the link between individuals and change. For example, in Bangalore, organisations such as Janaagraha have civic participation and government involvement at the heart of their ethos. This concept has been largely well received as it gathers information from the

public and then can formulate solutions that directly cater to their needs. Since this model has been publicly beneficial through NGOs there is potential for it to be successful in an official setting as well.

These kinds of solutions are so far really in a beta stage, they are just starting to be tested and evaluated at a governmental level. Moreover, it is important to remember that urban societies are complex organisms, and these sorts of solutions will not necessarily have the same efficacy in every city, especially considering the cultural, political, and infrastructural diversity various cities have globally. Having said that, so far, direct contact between people and governments has seemed to have positive results in places like Boston, and even in cities like Rio de Janeiro, there is potential for such platforms to be extremely advantageous. Therefore, I believe that, considering the conceivable benefits it could bring, transparent interactions between people and governments is the way forward.

Aside from the civic and medical examples mentioned here, let us know if you have any other ideas for ways in which the community and government can be more closely involved

Citations

[1]http://www.citylab.com/cityfixer/2015/02/what-bostons-snow-crisis-can-teach-us-about-solving-problems-in-new-ways/385645/

[1]https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2015/02/11/how-much-snow-did-boston-get/2e2Q0RCC0s2zw5GsaihtlL/story.html

[3]ftp://ftp.ibge.gov.br/Estimativas_de_Populacao/Estimativas_2013/estimativa_2013_dou.pdf