Revisiting an Age-Old African

Participatory Approach:

The Rebirth of Imbizo

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Abstract

This paper presents an age-old African participatory approach known as "imbizo" which, from time immemorial has been used throughout Africa as a traditional approach to finding common ground on issues that affect communities through community participation. Recently, notwithstanding minor changes, imbizo has been used by the South African government, post 1994, as a way to establish links between the government and communities regarding problems that affect those communities. Thus the main purpose of this paper is to introduce this approach to the mainstream academic audience as a complement to existing participatory methods. This entails a detailed presentation of imbizo, its usage throughout the years, its proposed usage in information systems development and a brief overview of existing participatory approaches and how they can be used with imbizo as a first step towards a home-grown participatory design that fits the local context.

Keywords

Culture, norms, participatory, imbizo, African tradition, community participation, information system development, user requirements elicitation.

Introduction

For nearly 40 years, participatory design (PD), as defined in Scandinavia and henceforth referred to as traditional PD, has been used in information system development (ISD) as a way of involving users in the development process. During this time, it has also spread to other countries (Greenbaum, 1993) and other industries (Dalsgaard, 2010, p. 22).

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However, this spread, specifically to other countries, has shown that traditional PD is hard to replicate in other countries due to sociological factors that didn't exist in Scandinavia. Because of this, various countries have used traditional PD with minor changes to accommodate those issues.

To accommodate the challenges that exist in developing countries with regards to ISD we needed an approach that does not only focus on users in business environment but in other spheres of society. For instance, the genesis of traditional PD was a business environment with computer literate users which may be easier to work in compared to an environment with computer illiterate users in a develop country context. In this regard, this paper revisits an age-old Africa participatory approach. As such this paper is relevant to the PD community because of the following reasons:

- New contexts bring new challenges to PD which is indicative of need to develop the concept further to accommodate challenges of those contexts.
- It highlights the lack of comprehensive research on using traditional PD in nonbusiness environments with nonbusiness users.
- That there are challenges that exist in developing countries that make traditional PD hard to use.
- There is an age-old African participatory approach that can be used to supplement the existing practices of traditional PD.

With the call to '*explore traditional fields of PD and emerging areas' in mind*, the contribution of this paper is then as follows: introduces an age- old African participatory approach whose rich characteristic equality of participants can add value to the existing body of knowledge with regards to participatory design. This is done by first highlighting the existing literature of traditional PD and how we could not use it to carry out certain tasks due challenges that exist in developing countries.

This focuses on the issues that make up traditional PD and how these issues play a role in the adaptation of PD around the world. Following this, the paper presents a participatory concept known almost all over Africa known as imbizo. This focuses on the fundamental characteristics of this concept and its use. Then the paper presents a comparative discussion and analysis of traditional PD and imbizo. In the end, the contribution of this paper is outlined.

Participatory Design

Numerous scholars argue that PD started in the early 1970s while others pre-date it earlier (Sanoff, 2007). One of the issues that can be attributed to these different views is the consensus of what constitutes PD. For instance, according to (Sanoff, 2007), there can be no single definition of PD. This view is supported by (Blomberg & Henderson, 1990) who states that there is no single view of PD nor there is a unified position on its theoretical underpinnings. Their argument is based on the notion that PD has different backgrounds and the areas of its application are diverse. PD draws from various fields such as software engineering, architecture, public policy, psychology, anthropology, sociology, labor studies, communication studies and political science. As pointed out by (Jacko & Sears, 2003), PD is a set of theories, practices, and studies related to end-users who are full participants in the activities

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leading to software and hardware computer products and computer based activities. However, it is important to note that there is no evidence to back the view that PD started prior the 1970s. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, this view is not supported.

The fundamental principle of PD is: first, users are not simply consulted at the beginning and called in to evaluate the system at the end; they are treated as partners throughout the design process (Jacko & Sears, 2003). Secondly, the mutual and reciprocal learning between the designers and the future users of the artifact that is being designed (Beguin, 2003).

According to Gregory (2003), this is accomplished by dividing all the design stakeholders into various teams that independently design paper mock-ups of the new systems (Gregory, 2003). In the end, a decision about which is the best design is made. This is done by following a three stage iterative (Blomberg & Henderson, 1990) process. According to Schneiderman (1998), the stages are (Shneiderman, 1997):

- The elicit knowledge about the domain;
- The design of the user interface or prototyping;
- Work practices and job redesign.

Regarding the first stage, since the future users of a system are more knowledgeable about the work environment and therefore are more suitable to provide information about the work environment, it is imperative that this knowledge is gathered prior to the development of a system that suits their needs and working conditions.

The second stage focuses on computer systems. It allows the users to draw up paper sketches, with the help of the expert designers, of the new system before the new system is built. The sketches are then cut into small prototypes that are videotaped to create a mock-up of the system (Shneiderman, 1997). Ultimately, the video of the prototype is used to test any usability issues that may exist in the user interface.

Regarding the third stage, along with the benefits the new artifact may bring to the organisation and the employees, it may bring changes to the work environment (Gregory, 2003). Therefore, the changes may require that the users of the new application be re-trained. Therefore, it is important that the changes are managed properly and that the users who are affected by the changes are active role players.

Considering these three stages, it is imperative to note that they assume a business environment where users are computer literate and they have an idea of drawing user interfaces. One of the issues that led to the research which this paper forms part of is how to use PD in an environment where there is no prior computer knowledge and low levels of education.

Furthermore, and to strengthen the view of business environment mentioned above, the start of traditional PD in Scandinavia, according to (Jacko & Sears, 2003; Spinuzzi, 2005a), is that of a resolution to a conflict between employees and their management due to the introduction of computer based machinery in the work place.

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They argue that the motivation behind this was the failure of senior management to consult employees about the technological changes that were being introduced to their work place. Employees had to adapt to the new working environment that resulted from the introduction of new computer technology. Employees had no input into the design of the new computer applications and were forced to use them (Spinuzzi, 2005b). Accordingly, they had to abandon their lifelong experiences and skills to learn to work with the new technology. This led to a number of problems for the employees because:

a.   The computer-based technologies reduced the number of jobs;
b.   The introduction of computer application and machinery was deskilling the workers (Spinuzzi, 2005a).

As a result, the labour unions in Scandinavia lobbied for laws that made it mandatory for employees to be involved in how their work environment was changed (Sharp, Rogers, & Preece, 2007). Sharp et al., states that laws governing such labour problems still exist (Sharp et al., 2007). Furthermore, this has led to the Scandinavian PD as being associated with trying to achieve the following three principles (Gregory, 2003):

a.   Striving for democracy and democratization;
b.   Explicit discussion of values in design and imagined futures;
c.   Methods that solve conflicts and contradictions in the work place.

These principles motivated Scandinavian researchers, Spinuzzi claims; to embark on finding a method that helps the software developers and employees to collaborate to develop new technologies (Spinuzzi, 2005a). This was the first step towards PD in Scandinavia and the first time that employees took control of their work environment. The projects that resulted from the start of PD in Scandinavia include; the Swedish DEMOS project (1975 – 1979), the Danish project DUE (1977 – 1980) and the well-known UTOPIA project (1981 – 1984) (Spinuzzi, 2005a) (Gregory, 2003). According to Gregory (2003), these projects paved the way for new variants of PD (Gregory, 2003). For instance, in North America PD was introduced in the mid-1980s (John M. Carroll & Rosson, 2007; Schuler & Namioka, 1993) with minor changes because factors such as workplace democracy and human empowerment which were critical in the genesis of traditional PD were not the driving force behind the need for a new design methodology in North America. This led to the assertion that PD in North America (North-American PD) is more oriented towards software production and rooted in Human Computer Interaction (HCI) which aims at involving the users in the testing of products rather than their involvement, over time, in the organisational development of change which is traditionally more common in Europe and Scandinavia (Clement & Van den Besselaar, 1993; Spinuzzi, 2005b).

North American PD is viewed as more focused on the management of the organisations or as more focused on the pragmatic premise of PD. As Sears et al states: North American PD is too friendly to management (Jacko & Sears, 2003). The literature review on this design methodology provides a variety of reasons why North American PD differs to Scandinavian PD:

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1. North America is a multi-cultural society and, therefore, faces more challenges than Scandinavia. These cultural diversities may become a challenge when working with users of difference races or languages. The choosing of one culture, to follow in the PD process, over another alienates various people who fell discriminated against.
2. Labor, in North America, is poorly organized and concerned with employment security and wage rates (J. M Carroll, 1996).
3. American companies are larger when compared to the small to medium size companies of Scandinavia.

Recently, as part of research project on using PD in developing countries and to conclude the discussion of traditional PD, we needed a way to elicit domain knowledge in a developing country context (South Africa) and we found, through literate review of existing publications, that traditional PD is silent on its on different societal contexts. The decision was then made to explore the use of existing traditional resources to complement PD for use in local contexts. In doing so, we hope to emphasize that when dealing with ordinary people, with different cultural background and outside business conditions traditional PD may need to look at other methods of engaging with users compared to other first world environment. Further, for the sake of brevity the results of using this method are not part of this paper but future publications.

Participatory tradition in Africa – the introduction of imbizo

Imbizo is a Nguni (a grouping of certain African languages) word for a traditional community gathering called by the chief to solve pertinent community issues. However, similar to most African traditions there is not much academic literature about this practice. On the other hand, since the democratic government of post 1994 in South Africa, imbizo has been brought into the mainstream by the government to engage with communities. As such, what is presented here is collection of documentation from African language literate. Because of this, it is imperative to understand the South African landscape and its people. The Republic of South Africa has nine provinces with 11 official languages. The languages are Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, sePedi, seSotho, seTswana, isiXhosa, tshiVenda and isiZulu. Except the first two, each of the language belong to the nine different people that make up the old South African nations (tribes) each of which has a variant of the word imbizo. For instance, in sePedi the word is *pitso*. While seSotho and seTswana and tshiVenda the word is *kgotla* and *tshivhidzo* respectively. Many other nations outside South Africa have a variant of the word imbizo. In these communities, since time immemorial, imbizo is used as a platform to resolve pertinent community challenges through honest engagement between the subjects and leadership (Mabelebele, 2006, p. 103)

But what constitutes imbizo?
According to Mabelebele, in the context of African indigenous communities, imbizo is the common practice of convening meetings by the chief, headman or any other community leader with a view to discussing issues of common concern and interest (Mabelebele, 2006, p. 103). It must be noted that a call for an imbizo can be due the issues that the chief gets from one or more community members or issues that the chief himself finds are important to the wellbeing of his community. For instance, a chief can call an imbizo to notify the village about his son's impending marriage for

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which the community has to make "lobola" contributions.

Like most African tradition there is little documentation on the genesis and history of the concept of imbizo. In this regard, an example from an old isiXhosa literature is used to illustrate the use of this concept.

Example of Imbizo in the AmaXhosa Culture

One of the well-known demonstrations of imbizo is found in the isiXhosa language literature in the work of S.E.K. Mqhayi's novel, *Ityala Lamawele* or "The Lawsuit of the Twins" (Mqhayi, 1970). The novel explores a case of two brothers, Wele and Babini, in which each was laying claim to being the heir to the dead father.

For the sake of brevity the novel can be summarized as follows: a case was opened and brought to the king by one of the twins, Wele, regarding who is the older of the two brothers and to get to a resolution the king suspends judgment and investigate the case by calling an imbizo. From here and to get to a solutions, a number of steps are taken (Lalu, 2007, p. 161; Nyamende, 2010): (1) the complainant, Wele, is called to state his case and he goes on to mention that is filing a lawsuit against his brother, Babini. Since their father is deceased, it is hard to carry out daily duties of the family because they both claim to be older and therefore seeks to help of the court to solve the problem for them. (2) The king calls various witnesses to testify on the case. Among others, the midwives who helped deliver the twins during their birth, the headman of their (the twins) clan and an elderly man who, customarily, is taken as a source or custodian of knowledge which in this instance is similar cases. (3) Having listened to all the parties involved in case, the king consulted an old man called Khulile before giving his judgment. (4) in the end, the king, although admitting that Wele is the oldest through the birth process, decides to give the management of the family affairs to the younger brother because of his natural talent, but highlighting that such management should be done in consultation with his brother and so maintaining harmony at the house.

Finally, a number of conclusions can be drawn from the above. First, it shows that there has to be a problem for an imbizo to be called. Secondly, the king calls the imbizo and all activities take place at the king's palace. Thirdly, various people and in agreement with (Mathagu, 2010), including experts, take part in the imbizo process. Further, it is noteworthy that in this instance women are allowed to take part in the imbizo but not in the decision making process. Finally, and in this case the king has a final say on the outcome of imbizo. Under normal circumstances the participants in the imbizo are the ones that decide the outcome of the imbizo. However, the participants may not agree on what decision should be taken and leave it for the king or chief to decide. Similar to the above judgment, the king or chief would take a stand and make a decision that benefits all the groups. Otherwise, people who do not agree with a decision would normally leave the village for another one which, if it happens often enough, may leave the king or chief with no people to lead and thus lose his power.

Imbizo in South African Politics

As alluded to earlier on, in recent times the next use of imbizo has been mostly by the South African government to engage with communities on the introduction and

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performance of government programmes. To understand how the government views and uses the concept of imbizo, the views of her former president are used. According to him, "*what happens at an imbizo is that you get called by the leadership in your area, village or whatever, you get called to a discussion of particular issue…you don't act, you discuss the action that you should collectively take*" (Mbeki, 2002). Another definition is found in (Mabelebele, 2006), who states that imbizo, as used by the government, is a meeting where members of a given neighbourhood and community discuss pertinent issues with leadership for their own development. From this definition it is clear that since decision making in politics is hierarchal, it is impossible to make decisions on the discussion of imbizo until all the policy related issues have been sorted out. It is not rare to find that before a decision is made it has to go through to provincial or national government.

To further illustrate the use of imbizo by the South African government, *Figure* shows phases the must be completed in the government imbizo in order to solve a particular problem. Each of these phases is made up of a number of steps. For instance, the pre-imbizo phase is made up of the following steps: (a) Planning (b) Establishing a national task team (c) Role clarification (d) Budget (d) Consultation with the province and local municipality. The second phase is made up of the following steps: (a) Media liaison (b) Publicity and promotional material (c) Conducting research for an imbizo. From these steps the government imbizo, unlike the traditional imbizo of the olden days, makes use of the faster and far reaching methods to get to the communities using the media. This leads to the third phase of the government imbizo which is made up of the following steps: (a) Recording to documenting all issues discussed and (b) Monitoring programme for time management. Finally the last phase is made up of the following steps: (a) Evaluation (b) Reporting and (c) Follow-up. The noteworthy issues of this phase is the follow-up which deals with going back to the community to give feedback about the decisions taken by the government regarding the issues raised at the imbizo.
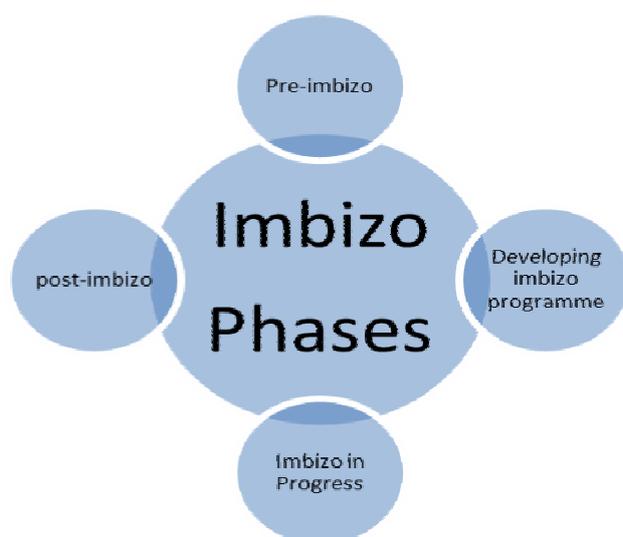

Figure 1: Phases of a government imbizo (Mathagu, 2010).

The use of imbizo by the government differs from traditional imbizo in a number of

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ways. For instance, traditional imbizos are held regularly to ensure that community problems are addressed as they emerge while the government imbizo takes place on rare occasions when the government evaluates its programmes.

Another issue of important between these two forms of imbizo is that of participation. In the traditionl imbizo, the chief and his subjects, warriors and medicine man, all took part and endeavour to influence its decisions (Mathagu, 2010). On the other hand, in the government imbizo, everybody is allowed to attend irrespective of age, gender, colour, creed or standing in society. Another distinction between these two concepts is the location of the imbizo. In tradional imbizo the participants have to go to the palace, as illustrated in the above example while in the government imbizo leaders go to the people. Furthermore, in both forms of imbizo, community members can air their opinions and concerns (Puri, Byrne, Nhampossa, & Quraishi, 2004, p. 45). However, as illustrated above the decision making regarding those issues differs.

To conclude the discussion of imbizo, as South Africa adopted other forms government, imbizo became an institution that is no longer faithfully adhered to by African communities, particularly in urban areas (Mathagu, 2010, p. 104). Courts and other forms of decision making bodies are used instead.

Finally, the discussion of imbizo cannot be complete without looking at other forms of the concept.

Other forms of Imbizo

During our research we came across another type of participatory approach called Letsema which is an adaptation of imbizo. The word letsema is a Sotho word which describes the communal practice of doing things as a collective. This approach is used by a South African non-governmental organization (NGO) to help communities uplift themselves by working as a collection. The NGO achieves its goals by following the five steps to initiate a project in a community. Namely: Firstly, they have adopted a "get to basics" approach to dealing with community issues. They look at what resources and capacities are located in the community which can be used to effect change. Secondly, they adopt approaches that are relevant for and rooted in the traditional cultural practices of the communities they are working with. Thirdly, they utilise an interactive processes like *role playing, mapping and visioning, to determine community concerns and develop solutions*. Fourthly, they make attempts to involve not only community structures and institutions, but also ordinary members within the communities in which they work. Lastly, they use a community mobilisation model to engage with the community. However, there is no doubt in the minds of the authors that there may be other forms or adaptations of the concept of imbizo but we cannot look at them all at once.

Proposed use of imbizo in Information System Development

To reconcile the discussion of all the issues mentioned above we look at how they can be used in ISD. The purpose for this is to emphasise how the traditional PD can be enhanced with the values found in each type of imbizo presented above. To put it in a different way: in light of the changes that traditional PD had to go through to in order to suit other contexts such as North America, *how can imbizo be to enhance*

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traditional PD such that it accommodate the developing country context?
As such, to make a contribution to the existing body of knowledge of traditional PD, imbizo has to contribute in addressing the *challenges that exist in different contexts,* which is the developing country context in this case and the *three stages* of the traditional PD process. We subsequently discuss in detail each of these issues.

The developing country context: from its inception, traditional PD, has been expanding to various contexts and changing to adapt to the challenges of those contexts. Among the issues that are a driving force behind such changes is workplace democracy, skilled users/workforce, culture, the workplace environment to name a few. Notably, it is not always the presence of these issues that leads to changes in traditional PD but it can be their absence in a particular context. For instance, traditional PD and North American PD share similar type of users (in terms of skills) but differ on cultural issues and working environment.

However, developing countries present a special case in the participatory design community due to the challenges, for instance the type of the users (unlike industrialized countries users can be less skilled ordinary people) that found in those countries and the conditions under which they work. Furthermore, users in developing countries are not traditional business users and that although there are multiple types of PD; they are silent on how to deal with cases outside the skilled-worker environment. As such, the use and success of traditional PD in such contexts depends on how it adapts to these challenges.

To adapt to the developing country, it is imperative that traditional PD embraces the challenges in manner that is familiar to the users and the culture of such environments. For instance, a study by (Winschiers-Theophilus, Bidwell, Chivuno-Kuria, & Kapuire, 2010) on working with indigenous in a developing country context found that the local people preferred using spoken word as a form of communication. Because of this, it is our view that certain areas of the imbizo approach can be used with traditional PD to address these challenges. For instance, communication using spoken word, which requires is the fundamental aspect of imbizo is a skill that is possessed by most people. This leads to the second issue.

The three stages of traditional PD: To reiterate from above, traditional participatory design consist of three stages. Namely: (a) elicitation of domain knowledge (b) prototyping and (c) work place redesign. Therefore, to make a contribution to a home-grown PD it is imperative that imbizo contributes to one of these stages. However, there is a slight problem because imbizo is not an artifact building process but a decision making one. Therefore, it is clear that imbizo will only contribute in the domain knowledge elicitation because it does not provide a mechanism for prototyping or workplace redesign.

In line with the above, imbizo entails (a) selection of the stakeholders affected by the problem and local experts in the problem domain who all have an interest in the problem or the interests of the community at large, (b) discussion of the problem and (c) decision making. Therefore, it becomes clear that home-grown PD can make use of approach not as a distinguishing factor but as a mechanism to accommodate the challenges mentioned above about the type of users that are found in the developing

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country context. Because selection, discussion and decision make use of spoken word as a means of communication and problem resolution.

Conclusion

This paper is important because the research on information systems projects in Africa advocates the need to empower the users to participate in the design and implementation of information systems (Waema, 1996). Yet methods to develop such system do not address the challenges that exist in this context. This paper started by presenting PD as defined in Scandinavia. It highlighted how the concept spread and adapted to other environments to cater for the challenges such as culture that differ from that of Scandinavia. It emphasized that imbizo is not presented as a substitute to existing participatory methods but rather an addition to address the challenges that exist in developing countries such as dealing with ordinary people instead of the business people that PD was founded with in mind.

This paper answers the question of the relevance of social and cultural conditions and contexts of work for development of informatics by arguing that PD exist in many forms as demonstrated by the changes added to it when it was introduced in North America. The paper answers this question by arguing, as found by Elovaara et al (2006, p. 105), that PD is not singular, definite, closed and fixed approach.

Furthermore, this paper answers the question of the developmental challenges that are brought by widespread deployment of technologies in deprived communities by arguing that local norms and traditions must be included in the ISD process to improve encourage user participation and the chances of developing information systems that meet local needs.

Finally, by introducing the concept of imbizo to the academic audience with the aim of using it in ISD we hope that social and cultural conditions and contexts will be incorporated in contemporary ISD processes.

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