RESEARCH ARTICLE

ENHANCING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION THROUGH WARD COUNCILLORS AND COMMITTEES IN THE GREATER TZANEEN MUNICIPALITY

MAHLATSE RAGOLANE[1], THABISO MALATJI[2]

[1,2] Department of Public Administration, University of Limpopo, South Africa
[1] mahlatze23@gmail.com ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1889-7616
[2] thabiso.malatji@ul.ac.za ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8638-6551

Abstract

Ward committees and councillors are important to the functionality of committees in the policy-making processes. Local government municipalities depend on councillors and committees to facilitate community engagements and participation to ensure that communities receive the necessary services. This study aims to understand the role of ward committees and councillors in facilitating public participation and efficient service delivery to citizens. This study argues that the lack of capacity building of ward committees and councillors has led to the ineffectiveness and lack of participatory democracy in local government municipalities making service delivery unsatisfactory and unfavourable. The methodology used in this study is qualitative and data is obtained through interviews and other secondary sources and materials. The study was limited to the Greater Tzaneen Municipality representatives in the public participation portfolios. The study findings reveal that municipalities do not have enough capacity to build ward councillors and committees, leading to a lack of engagement from communities and municipalities. It is recommended that public participation should be the first mandate of ward committees and councillors through capacity building and policy frameworks that ensure that they understand their roles and functions for effective service delivery.

Keywords: capacity building, ward councillors, ward committees, local government, public participation, service delivery

INTRODUCTION

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) section 152 guarantees several rights for citizens, including the rights of communities to participate in local governance (SALGA, 2013). Public participation is a fundamental aspect of democracy and service delivery in South Africa (Maphazi, Raga, Taylor, & Mayekiso, 2013). It is primarily vested in local government, which is the closest to the grassroots level. Since the establishment of democracy in 1996, public participation has undergone significant evolution, particularly with the drafting of the new South African Constitution. The Constitution of South Africa firmly establishes the country as a constitutional democracy, emphasising the importance of representative and participatory democracy (South African Parliament, 2019). Local governments must establish structures and systems to promote good governance and fulfil this constitutional obligation. The actualization of public involvement in local government has been hampered by several issues, including accountability, responsibility, equity, openness, efficacy, and conformity to the law (Ragolane & Malatji, 2021). The South African Local Government Association (SALGA) views ward committees as just one of several ways to ensure public participation and community involvement in the municipality and it is acknowledged that public participation is an essential component of local democracy and participatory local governance and that the involvement of communities and community organizations in matters of local government is one of the goals of local government (SALGA, 2013).

Literature indicates that participatory processes in South Africa lack transformative qualities and confidence in governmental institutions, as evidenced by recurring service delivery protests (Tshoose, 2015). Consequently, the efficacy of representative democracy in South Africa is questioned. Public participation is crucial in local

government, especially in the Local Economic Development (LED). According to Kgobe, Mabeba, and Mamokhere (2023), public participation in local economic development encompasses the active and significant engagement of community members and various stakeholders in the planning, decision-making and implementation processes that lead to the creation of economic growth and improvement of the well-being of communities or municipality through the assessment of policies and initiatives in municipalities. As such ward committee structures and councillors play pivotal roles in local government, serving as structured communication channels between communities and councils (municipality) (de Visser, 2007; Silima, 2013). These structures facilitate resident contributions to municipal decision-making processes, thereby promoting participatory democracy and transparency. However, challenges such as poor skills among committee members and ongoing community protests contribute to significant service delivery backlogs (Sikhakane & Reddy, 2011). Effective ward committees, councillors, and robust public participation structures are essential to address these challenges. Thornhill and Madumo (2011) emphasize the importance of committees in facilitating public participation and service delivery within local government. Community leaders play a crucial role in promoting local participatory democracy and educating rural communities on service delivery and decision-making processes (Smith & Visser, 2009).

This study aims to investigate the role of ward committees and councillors in fostering participatory democracy and effective policy-making processes in communities, focusing on the Greater Tzaneen Municipality. Specifically, it seeks to understand their impact on service delivery and identify factors contributing to service delivery challenges (Ngele, 2010). Previous research underscores the importance of ward committees in promoting public participation, influenced by factors such as support from local government officials, community involvement, and capacity building (Silima and Auriacombe 2013; Van Rooyen and Mokoena, 2013). This paper sheds light on the role of ward committees and councillors in public participation and policymaking, this study aims to inform policy and practice not only within the Tzaneen Municipality but also in other local government municipalities across South Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW
1.1. The Concept of Community Participation

In South Africa, the government has implemented various strategies and initiatives to foster participation, such as ward committees, citizen forums, community development workers, and public hearings (Public Service Commission, 2008). Participation can be defined as a process where members of the public, including individuals and interest groups, engage in goal-oriented activities (Masango, 2002). Community participation is integral to local governance, as it promotes sustainable decisions and enhances community efficiency, legitimacy, and liveability (Molaba, 2016). According to Mosotho (2013), community participation entails involving various stakeholders in the community, including ward committees, councillors, businesspeople, traditional leaders, and other stakeholders, in planning processes such as strategies, performance management, monitoring, and project implementation. It encompasses community involvement in municipal activities, decision-making processes, the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), and budgetary processes. Despite its importance, public participation in local democracy remains low, primarily due to a lack of direct incentives for participation and a lack of awareness about local government functions and decision-making processes. To increase citizen participation, it is essential to start with small touchpoints and programs, gradually building trust and engagement. This can involve informing, consulting, involving, collaborating with, and empowering the public throughout the decision-making process (US Environmental Protection Agency, online). Encouraging citizen participation in local government decision-making processes is crucial for promoting participatory democracy and transparency, as elected officials significantly influence residents' daily experiences in their communities. According to Molepo et al. (2015), public involvement is vital for achieving and enhancing service delivery, as development should be people-centred (Molepo et al., 2015). Public participation provides individuals with the opportunity to influence public decisions and is a fundamental component of the democratic decision-making process (Maphazi et al., 2013). In the context of this study, community participation refers to the involvement of municipal communities in decision-making and sustainable development projects. It catalyses better service delivery, ensuring that community members are consulted, involved, and engaged in municipal activities that affect their lives. Thus, ward committees and councillors are tasked with facilitating this participatory process.

1.2. The Role of Ward Committees and Ward Councillors on Community Participation

Ward committees and councillors play a vital role in fostering community participation in local governance. Initially introduced to enhance communication between municipalities and communities, ward committees serve as representative structures to liaise with the municipality and address the needs of residents (Madumo, 2011; Sekgala, 2016; Mosotho, 2013). Mandated by legislation, municipalities utilize ward committees to interact,

consult, and involve communities in decision-making processes (Mosotho, 2013). The ward councillor leads the committee, organizing meetings and setting agendas to ensure community involvement in municipal affairs and issues affecting their lives (Naidoo, 2017). Tasked with representing citizens and communities, ward committees inform the municipality about community challenges, aspirations, and potentialities (Mhlari, 2014). They are integral to promoting local democracy and citizen participation, mobilizing communities to engage in civic initiatives (Mosotho, 2013).

As the primary governance body at the grassroots level, ward committees are often the first to hear community grievances and concerns, necessitating effective communication and participation mechanisms (Mhlari, 2014). They provide a platform for communities to voice their opinions and complaints, facilitating dialogue between residents and their political representatives (Lesia, 2011). Ward councillors bear the responsibility of representing community interests, staying informed about local issues, monitoring development, and ensuring service delivery (Sekgala, 2007). They must prioritize public participation, ensuring voters are involved and informed about council decisions (DPLG, 2005). Ward committees are mandated to reach all sectors of their wards, consulting with residents on development and service plans (Lesia, 2011). Both ward committees and councillors share the common goal of improving residents' lives, representing them in municipal councils, and ensuring they are well-informed, consulted, and communicated with regarding decisions affecting their communities. Their roles underscore the importance of prioritizing public participation in all municipal functions and priorities. Capacitating ward committees and ward councillors are essential for the effective functioning of both the municipality and the community they serve. To carry out their responsibilities effectively, ward committees and councillors require a certain level of knowledge, skills, and expertise, as well as access to resources. However, a lack of funding or resources often hinders capacity-building efforts, which can impede their ability to fulfil their obligations as outlined in the constitution and municipal policies (Sekgala, 2016; IDASA, 2010).

1.3. Capacity Building in the municipality

Capacity building is crucial to ensure that officials understand the mechanisms, policies, and processes of participation necessary for effective governance. Without proper capacity building, challenges such as poor communication structures, ineffective councillors, and high turnover rates persist, hindering the municipality's ability to uplift communities and make informed decisions (Mbuyisa, 2013; Atkinson, 2002; Sebugwawo, 2011; Karamoko, 2011; Hirsh, 2010). Ward committee members require adequate training to engage with communities on issues such as the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) and budgetary processes. Lack of capacity within municipalities not only affects the functioning of ward committees but also undermines the overall municipal system (Khuzwayo, 2009). Municipalities must prioritise capacitating ward committees and councillors to address these challenges and ensure effective community participation. This involves ensuring the proper constitution of ward committees, providing training for councillors and committee members, allocating resources, and clearly defining their roles in council processes (Mngxali, 2008).

Studies have shown that inadequately capacitated ward committees struggle to effectively engage in participatory processes, ultimately undermining their ability to encourage community participation (Putu, 2006; Mdlalose, 2016). The challenges faced by ward committees, such as low incentives, insufficient resources, and lack of recognition, are symptomatic of broader capacity issues within municipalities, particularly in financial management (Mdlalose, 2016). Addressing these capacity challenges is crucial for municipalities to improve their performance and better serve their communities. By investing in capacity-building initiatives, municipalities can empower ward committees and councillors to fulfil their roles effectively, ultimately promoting transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in local governance.

1.4. The effectiveness of the ward committees in helping the municipality with public participation.

Ward committees and councillors play a crucial role in promoting public participation within municipalities. Ward councillors, directly elected by residents, represent their interests in council based on election mandates (Molaba, 2016). Effective ward committees ensure community representation, enabling municipalities to identify and address community needs while fostering accountability (Lesia, 2011). However, many municipalities still lack functional ward committees despite their importance in community involvement (Lesia, 2011). Neglected by some municipalities, ward committees are vital in facilitating participation and identifying community priorities, essential for Integrated Development Plan (IDP) processes (Njenga, 2009; Madumo, 2011). Ward committees assist municipalities in understanding community issues and priorities, bridging gaps that municipalities alone cannot fill (Raophala, 2013). Their functions include serving as intermediaries between communities and councils, leveraging community resources, supporting community activities, and disseminating information (Maphazi et al., 2013). Yet, challenges persist. Many ward committees and councillors face uncertainties, misunderstanding their

roles and failing to involve communities effectively (Lesia, 2011). Without proper understanding and capacity, ward committees struggle to address community challenges and engage in participatory processes (Mhlari, 2014).

Capacity building is crucial to address these challenges. Many ward committee members lack essential skills and qualifications, hindering their ability to comprehend municipal processes and enforce public participation (Mdlalose, 2016). Inadequate resources further limit effectiveness, preventing proper engagement with community issues and municipal drafts (Bendle, 2008; Mdlalose, 2016). To enhance public participation, it's imperative to prioritize capacity-building initiatives. This includes providing training, resources, and support to equip them with the skills and expertise needed to fulfil their roles effectively. By investing in capacity building, municipalities can empower ward committees and councillors to promote transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement in local governance.

1.5. Factors for effective and sustainable public participation processes

Public participation processes ought to be designed to encompass all segments of the population, particularly marginalized and historically disadvantaged groups (Municipal Systems Act No.32 of 2000). This can be achieved by implementing directed outreach, ensuring language accessibility, and employing community-specific engagement strategies to gather diverse perspectives (Kgobe et al. 2023). Municipalities are responsible for creating an environment that encourages local community participation in various municipal affairs, such as the preparation, implementation, and review of the integrated development plan, performance management system, budget preparation, and strategic decisions related to municipal services. The Municipal Systems Act further outlines the municipality's responsibilities in ensuring consultations with communities, including those in rural areas, to receive feedback and engage in consultation.

- *Cultivating a culture for public participation*

Public participation can be successful when both the public and the government actively initiate and engage in the process. Section 16(1) of the Municipal Systems Act, 32 of 2000, states that municipalities must establish a participatory governance culture that encourages community and stakeholder involvement. This involves creating an environment that fosters public participation, rather than relying solely on formal representation. To ensure the effectiveness of public participation processes, both the public and the government must make engagement a norm. As noted by Midgley et al (1986), cited in Masango (2001), fostering social and political awareness among citizens is crucial for cultivating a culture of public participation. However, before this can happen, the public must first understand the importance and value of public participation. This can be achieved through educational interventions that help communities identify and solve problems effectively. Furthermore, as emphasized by IDASA (2010), cultivating a culture of public participation is critical for promoting inclusivity and including public input into municipal governance issues.

- *Organising for public participation*

Organising for public participation includes having to work with community organisations for participation enhancements. Therefore, this will include the churches, youth clubs, and sports organisations in the communities. This enables the community to become aware of the processes of public participation, thus improving the interest of the community to participate. Masango (2001) also supports the establishment of ward committees for how they are effective in the public participation process, thus bringing public participation to the grassroots level. He adds that the community organisation will help eliminate the political status quo in the community surrounding tradition and race, therefore building a focus on the finding of solutions in the communities.

- *Capacity building*

To promote community participation, it is essential for the local authorities to facilitate the involvement of residents in municipal affairs. As stipulated in the Municipal Systems Bill of 1999, as cited by Masango (2001), the municipal council has the responsibility to communicate information to the residents within its financial and administrative means, thus fostering the capacity of the community. This is done in relation to the processes, structures, and procedures for encouraging public engagement, the rights and responsibilities of people and communities, municipal government, and management and development. Capacity building is important to enhance public participation, Masango states that an approach is needed to educate the public about the functions, rights, and duties they have. This will include having workshops, Khuzwayo (2009) mentions that workshops will help educate the public about the role of the municipality, its functions, and how they participate in the activities of the municipality. Midgley et al. (1986) as cited by Masango (2001) recommend the introduction of training which includes, workshops and programmes to capacitate the communities with participatory skills.

- *Utilization of appropriate methods of participation*

Masango states that the epitome of public participation is to identify and utilise methods which will be effective in ensuring that the community participates and influences the policymaking and implementation process. He includes that studies have shown that methods such as public hearings may have little effect on the plans and policies of the municipality (Catanse, 1984 as cited in Masango, 2001). Municipalities, therefore, need to have the proper processes which will have an impact on the people's lives in turn. This is because in Mdlalose (2016) it was identified that the reason for the service delivery protests was that of communication breakdown, which implies that the processes that the municipality uses to communicate with the citizens have however proven not to be useful. Atkinson (1992) and Rosener (1978), as cited in Masango (2001), state that methods such as radio, television, citizen representation in policymaking and questionnaire surveys could have a positive impact.

2.   METHOD

A research methodology encompasses various investigative approaches, such as ethnographic, realistic, anthropological, field, or participant-observer research (Molaba, 2016). This study adopted a qualitative approach to gather information, as qualitative research is adept at exploring the complexities of phenomena, aiming to describe and understand them (Mosotho, 2013; Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). Conducted within the Greater Tzaneen Municipality, the research engaged municipal officials. The respondents, comprising four females and four males aged between 40 and 60, were carefully balanced in terms of gender. Most officials had pursued tertiary education, demonstrating a substantial level of education within municipal offices. The qualitative methodology was chosen to delve into the nuances of public participation issues from the perspective of municipal officials. In-depth interviews were employed as the primary data collection tool, facilitating profound conversations and robust data generation (Morse et al. 2002; Mdlalose, 2016). To ensure confidentiality, participants agreed to the secure handling of data. A predetermined set of questions, translated into the local language but predominantly conducted in English for better understanding, guided the interviews. This structured approach ensured alignment with the research objectives and consistency across participant interactions. Building trust and rapport with participants during interviews was essential, fostering open dialogue and enriching data collection (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Raophala, 2013). Participants were encouraged to share additional insights beyond the scope of predefined questions, enriching the study with unforeseen but valuable information. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with pertinent insights, including the Manager in the Public Participation Office, the Director of Community Services, the Councillor, Committee members, and the Community Development Facilitator. Data were analysed thematically, grouping responses into patterns to organize, categorize, and summarize findings effectively. Thematic analysis facilitated a comprehensive understanding of respondents' perspectives, allowing for clear and elaborate reporting. By clustering similar responses into thematic categories, the researcher gained deeper insights into the state of public participation within the municipality.

3.   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings presented in this section are derived from interviews conducted at the Greater Tzaneen Municipality and have been categorized into the following themes.

- *Service Delivery, Public Participation and the Capacity in the Municipality*

When questioned about the municipality's capacity to deliver services, the community development facilitator responded as follows:

"I am not well-versed in our financial capacity; however, the municipality does allocate a budget for service delivery. Unfortunately, this budget often falls short for participation processes."

The respondent further elaborated that while public participation should be prioritized for community projects, the municipality tends to allocate budget mainly for the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) and the State of the Municipality Address (SOMA), leading to struggles in budget allocation for other essential processes, particularly in villages. Furthermore, she noted that despite efforts by the Department of Communication to install WIFI for the IDP and other community issues, the municipality still lacks technological advancement. Some officials acknowledged that budgetary constraints occasionally pose challenges, leading to unsuccessful participation processes. Furthermore, there is a shortage of officials who truly understand the significance of public participation. It has been emphasized that the challenges underscore the importance of inclusivity, better communication, and improved municipal capacity to unleash the transformative potential, especially from the Local Economic Development perspective (Kgobe et al., 2023). Ward committees and councillors often struggle to understand its significance and fail to ensure effective implementation within communities. Research findings revealed that many ward committee members in villages lack educational qualifications, leading to improper procedures for community participation. Insufficient capacity building (Kgobe et al. 2023) and lax entry requirements for committee members exacerbate the issue (Thusi, Mayisela and Matyana, 2023).

Moreover, the municipality doesn't actively support the establishment of NGOs or other organizations in villages, hindering communication and community engagement. Public participation mechanisms exist mainly on paper and are not effectively exercised. Overall, there's a significant gap in capacity for public participation, particularly in disadvantaged areas. Insufficient training and awareness among ward committee members, councillors, and officials further contribute to this challenge. These findings highlight several prevailing issues affecting the municipality's capacity, including inadequate financial and human resources, non-adherence to procedures and policies, low productivity, weak information management, and poor adherence to IDP, Performance Management System (PMS), and budget processes. Inefficient training of ward committees and weak community feedback mechanisms further compound these challenges. Mngaxli (2008), identified similar challenges in a study conducted in eThekwini municipality, emphasizing the lack of skills among ward committees, insufficient knowledge of protocols and municipal policies, and limited office equipment and facilities support.

- *The effectiveness of the ward committees and councillors in helping the municipality with public participation.*

Ward committees are established by the Municipal Structures Act, Act no. 117 of 1998, as a statutory body to aid the councillor in fulfilling their mandate. Municipalities must establish these committees as outlined in Chapter 4 of the Act, to represent the community's citizens' needs and facilitate public participation. According to the Director of community services, in rural areas, even councillors may not attend meetings, which hampers the municipality's ability to serve the community (Ragolane and Malatji, 2021). The manager of the public participation office stated that while some committee members may lack skills, the issue of merit is also a concern. He contends that the appointment or election process is a rush to deliver services on the ground. This view is supported by Sekgala (2016), who posits that ward committee members often prioritize their political parties over the community. As a result, public participation does not benefit the municipality. In some rural areas, councillors may lack formal education, and their staff may lack skills as well, hindering their ability to write reports. However, the municipality has recognized this problem and is now establishing a criterion of matriculation or higher by collaborating with larger organizations. Putu (2006), as cited by Sekgala (2016), argues that councillors often lack the technical knowledge to explain and analyse development decisions made by municipal councils. The ward committees in the villages are not promoting public participation in any way, and they do not have the capacity as they are divided in the villages. This is also in agreement with the findings of Mosotho (2013) also stated that the ward committees are not able to facilitate the processes of public participation in a way that is efficient, which overall hinders the effectiveness of public participation in the municipalities.

The research findings revealed that within the committees there are divisions and infightings, and the councillors also cater to those who are in support. This is supported by Reddy and Sikhakane (2008) in the findings from a study through questionnaires that the Buffalo City Municipality had internal official fights and politicians who were fighting for positions. Therefore, public participation becomes an issue which happens when there is chaos in the villages. The ward committees and the councillors do not know how to deal with community conflicts, negotiations, and community dynamics. One official added that:

"The ward committees do not give much attention to public participation; the reason is that in the villages there are no organisations that will oversee the ward committees if they are doing their job. The ward committees are free to do whatever they want, and it is not even close to promoting public participation."

The community development facilitator alluded that the ward committees are frustrated just like the communities, therefore participation no longer progresses. Because sometimes they are exploited by the councillors together with the traditional authorities, thus hampering the effectiveness of public participation. By doing so they promote their political agendas and self-interests. This is supported by Khuzwayo (2009) who mentioned that there is a perception that ward committees are captured and used to advance the interests of specific individuals or groups. While ward committees must uplift the standard of the communities, they moreover focus on benefiting from the process. One of the challenges with the ward committees is the lack of education therefore, it impacts their role, and there is no adherence to the legislation by the ward councillors in terms of community feedback meetings and lack of functionality by ward clusters (Greater Tzaneen Municipality IDP Report, 2020/2021).

The statement from the manager in the public participation office reveals a critical deficiency in the capacity of ward committees and their councillors to facilitate effective public participation. The manager indicated that the primary role of ward committees is coordination, stating that:

"…to coordinate people does not need capacity because you are given an instruction by your supervisor which is the councillor."

This implies that ward committees act merely as conduits for disseminating information from councillors to the public, rather than actively engaging with and understanding the community's needs. This perspective

underscores a significant issue: the ward committees and their councillors lack the necessary skills and knowledge to foster meaningful public participation. Their current role does not involve interpreting or processing information, which is crucial for effective community engagement. Instead, they function under direct instructions, limiting their ability to act independently or respond to the community's unique concerns and needs.

Sekgala (2016) supports this argument by highlighting the incapacity of ward committee members to interpret and digest complex information such as budgets and Integrated Development Plans (IDPs). He poses a rhetorical question about the ability of ward committee members to spread information they do not understand themselves. This gap in understanding and capacity significantly hampers their effectiveness in public participation roles. For ward committees to truly know and address the needs of their communities, they must be equipped with appropriate skills and resources. Conducting research to gather community input and translate this into actionable insights requires a higher level of capability than mere coordination.

Therefore, it is imperative to enhance the capacity of both ward committees and their councillors. Training in public engagement, budget interpretation, and community research methods would empower them to fulfil their roles more effectively, ensuring that public participation is meaningful and impactful. The current operational model of ward committees as mere coordinators is inadequate for genuine public participation. There is a clear need for capacity building among ward committees and councillors to enable them to understand, engage with, and act upon community needs and inputs effectively.

- *Community's Involvement and Interest*

The issue of declining community involvement in municipal affairs unveils several underlying challenges that warrant attention to ensure effective participation. According to the community development facilitator, low attendance at meetings may be indicative of declining interest. However, the manager of the public participation office presents a differing viewpoint, suggesting that the problem lies not in municipal functions themselves, but in individual councillors – this is despite the training provided by the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) to develop the skills and capacity of municipal councillors (Sebola, 2014). However, the effectiveness of these training programs is often questioned, and the impact of the training provided by contracted experts is a concern (Sebola, 2014)

Participants confirmed their interest in municipal functions but expressed frustration that committees and community leaders often lack knowledge about the services that should be provided. This disconnect hinders meaningful participation and discourages community members from contributing to discussions about projects that frequently remain unfinished. One participant emphasized the lack of guidance on how to participate correctly in municipal functions, indicating a need for education and clearer communication. As councillors change while the municipality remains constant, this perspective is supported by a study conducted by Thusi, Mayisela, and Matyana (2023), which investigated the effectiveness of various public participation mechanisms on service delivery in the Newcastle Local Municipality. The study revealed a spatial dimension to the results, with 35% of participants, primarily from Newcastle West, a suburban area of the city, expressing a lack of interest in public participation initiatives. These individuals consistently reported low attendance at public meetings and low voter turnout in ward committee elections and by-elections (Thusi et al. 2023).

A participant from Kgwe-kgwe pointed out that officials' apparent lack of interest in collaborating with the community and resolving issues exacerbates the problem. This disinterest leaves the community feeling powerless and excluded, as officials fail to inform them adequately about community activities and functions. Respondents also mentioned that their low level of education prevents them from knowing how, where, and to whom they should turn to participate in municipal activities. This educational gap further impedes their ability to engage effectively.

The community's disinterest in municipal meetings unless there is an incentive, such as food, reflects a broader issue of mistrust and disengagement. Municipal officials are perceived to engage with the community only during election times, reinforcing the community's reluctance to participate due to a lack of trust. This sporadic interaction results in a perception that officials are not genuinely committed to addressing community needs.

- *Ward Committees, Ward Councillors and Their Impact on Community Participation and Service Delivery*

The study revealed that ward committees, mandated by the Municipal Structures Act 32 of 2000, are crucial for public participation but often fail to effectively represent community needs. The Director of Community Services highlighted that in villages, even councillors sometimes neglect meetings due to lack of education, further hampering participation efforts. Appointment processes forward committees and councillors often prioritize political interests over community needs, hindering effective public participation. Sekgala (2016) and Putu (2006) underscored the disconnect between councillors and communities, with councillors often unable to comprehend or explain development decisions due to technical complexities. Ward committees, particularly in villages, lack cohesion and fail to facilitate effective participation processes. Infighting and lack of conflict resolution skills

exacerbate the situation. Lack of education among ward committees and non-adherence to legislative requirements further undermine their effectiveness. The public participation manager noted that ward committees primarily serve as coordinators, lacking the capacity for meaningful public engagement. Capacitating ward committees and councillors is essential for improving public participation processes and ensuring community needs are addressed effectively. The challenges outlined underscore the need for comprehensive capacity-building initiatives and structural reforms within the municipality. Prioritizing training and strengthening accountability mechanisms are essential steps towards fostering meaningful community participation and improving service delivery.

4.   RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that the local municipality should ensure that the candidates for ward councillors and ward committees are capacitated about the government measures needed for the service delivery acceleration so that they can be able to work closely with the communities and carry out the mandate. It is further recommended that the political parties equip their ward councillors with more training and skills necessary for leadership positions, to liaise with the community, conflict management, and resolution. The local government should work together with different political parties to ensure that all councillors and ward committees are trained. The municipality should also investigate the councillor's and ward committees' line on the guidelines of community planning while looking at the tasks, and resources of each ward. Ward councillors and ward committees must always prioritize the community's interests over their political parties' interests. The issue of credibility, appointment, and character of ward committees, traditional leaders, community leaders, and councillors has been identified as a significant problem in ensuring proper community participation and clear participation processes. The current appointment process, which involves a raised hand, has resulted in ward committees and councillors who only attend to those who were/are in support, and this has stalled participation and hindered service delivery. Therefore, it is essential to capacitate and strengthen the roles of ward committees and councillors by assessing them on their skills, knowledge, and expertise to carry out public participation processes. This includes providing them with training in public participation, IDP processes, conflict management, negotiations, and other relevant areas. Furthermore, the municipality must allocate an annual budget to programs that will help capacitate them. It is also important for the municipality to consider strengthening its public participation processes and strategies, such as public hearings, IDP consultations, community involvement in the IDP consultation and implementation process, and public participation outreach programs.

5.   CONCLUSION

Local government as the sphere closer to the community, is expected to deliver services and work closely with the local leadership. The municipality must ensure that the community has access to information using a variety of platforms, such as media and newspapers, so that they can participate in decision-making processes and hold the municipality accountable where it has failed to deliver. However, this remains a challenge because most of the local leaders, like ward councillors and wards, are not adequately capacitated. This continues to be a problem with a serious impact on service delivery. The councillors and ward committees often forget their responsibilities and, instead of serving the communities, they serve the interests of their political parties. Therefore, it is essential to hold councillors and ward committees accountable for their actions and ensure that they prioritize the needs of the communities they serve over their political party's interests.

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