An investigation into the effectiveness of public participation mechanisms on service delivery within the Newcastle local municipality

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ABSTRACT

A little over two years ago, from the 9th to the 18th of July 2021, South Africa experienced one of the worst incidents of civil unrest since the beginning of its democratic dispensation. Although the main catalyst for this unrest was not directly issues of service delivery or public participation, many observers, experts or not could not help but see the connection to issues of poverty, unemployment and overall lack of service delivery. Public participation has long been established as a vital tool in the hands of the government for efficient service delivery & development. The Newcastle Local Municipality (NLM) as an institution in South Africa, is governed by numerous public participation legislation which essentially states it must always consult & involve all its citizens on all issues that affect the community at large. Despite its adherence to these stipulations, this brief study, through a qualitative inquiry making use of an interview schedule, finds that NLM practices a type of participation strategy known as “Degrees of tokenism” where the result is the appeasement and placation of the masses as opposed to true participation that gives the masses real power. The results indicated that the officials entrusted with ensuring the implementation of the public participation mandate faced numerous challenges that rendered their stellar efforts inefficient. Issues such as a lack of understanding of the fundamental importance of good governance and public participation led to a shortage of resources and increased apathy towards municipal affairs. In investigating the nature of the public participation framework in NLM the researcher aimed at providing more insight into the complex issues at play responsible for the largely concerning state of local government in South Africa, thus possibly providing solutions in the process.

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Introduction

Emerging from an intentionally segregated society in 1994 to a truly democratic disposition amongst other nations in the international arena, South Africa was faced with the daunting task of not only fixing the injustices of the past but also ensuring that the consolidation of democratic principles occurred in an effective manner. This new democratic era saw the introduction of the South African Constitution, Act 108 of 1996 which essentially divided government into three spheres and charged the sphere closest to the masses, local government, with a mandate of “encouraging the involvement of communities and community organizations in the matters of local government (RSA Constitution, 1996). This directive from the highest law of the land is supported by several legislative documents also emphasizing the importance of cultivating a public administration that promotes public participation. Considering that the face of local government in South Africa is the Municipality, the 1998 White Paper on Local Government and the Local Government Municipal Structures Act 117 of 1998 both ascribed a developmental role to the municipal institution (Fourie & Van der Waldt, 2021). Vital to implementing sustainable development in a democratic state, is the simultaneous implementation
of public participation, a seemingly simple but loaded concept. Creighton (2005) suggests that before one can attempt to define public participation, they first need to consider the key components affecting this concept. To this end, he identifies the technical nature of the work and knowledge often present in the functioning of organisations and the centrality of decision-making within public participation (Creighton, 2005). A holistic definition of public participation should account for these elements and so the definition adopted in this brief paper is; public participation is the process by which public concerns, needs, and values are incorporated into governmental and corporate decision making (Creighton, 2005) This perspective sheds light on another key component of public participation which is communication, two way communication and interaction to be exact, that is aimed at with making better decisions that are supported by the public.

The Municipal Structures Act dedicates part 4 within it, to the establishment of one of the key structures and mechanisms that category A and B municipalities make use of to ensure the public participation mandate is implemented, the Ward Committee structure. Ward committees are the main tool of public participation available to the above-mentioned relevant municipalities and through this body, municipalities exercise numerous public participation mechanisms to keep the citizens under their respective jurisdiction sufficiently informed and involved with regards to service delivery issues. Within the Newcastle Local Municipality (NLM), 34 wards require 34 ward committees consisting of 10 members per committee, all elected democratically and each chaired by an elected Ward Councillor. This structure forms the vital chain between the municipality and its citizens and keeps a constant flow of information between local government and the community in number of ways, including but not limited to; Public Meetings, Ward Committee meetings and Monthly reports containing issues from members of the community, that require feedback. However, despite all these contingency structures and rules in place, the people of Newcastle, those from formal and informal settlements alike, have increasingly shown their discontent at local government through service delivery protests. A reduction was recorded to nearly one per day in 2018 then the number started growing steadily again in 2019 to about 2.5 a day on average and maintaining this trend for most of 2020 before rising again in 2021 (Lancaster, 2022). 2022 has seen a decrease once again however the forever present possibility of service delivery protests is an expression of the general unhappiness of local communities and the municipalities that do not meet their expectations with regards to service delivery. If one is to look at the concept of service delivery by purely analysing the words that make this phrase, then the ‘service’ aspect which refers to a system supplying a need such as roads, transport, communications, refuse collection, etc. or utilities such as, electricity and water in the public service, covers the first part. Delivery is defined as an act of carrying and giving out something or giving up; handover (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2020). Taking these descriptions into consideration, this study service delivery can thus be understood as the way services are taken to the people or users. It refers to service provision based on service availability and capability.

The point of view of members of the public of their respective municipalities with regards to service delivery, is greatly affected by the extent and effectiveness of public participation endeavours by the government institutions. As Madi (2016) note “all actors in development, particularly those who have direct social or economic involvement and interest, have a different perspective on what is a problem and what constitutes improvement in their communities”. The Municipal Systems Act (MSA), No. 32 of 2000, Section 4(2) (c) and (e) both state that the council has a duty to “encourage the involvement of the local community” and “consult the community about the level, quality, range & impact of municipal services” (Municipal Systems Act, 2000).

The custodian unit or section within the NLM for this important constitutional mandate is the public participation unit and it is tasked with not only ensuring the ward committees maintain a certain level of functionality but also that community involvement at large is institutionalized within both municipality and the greater population of Newcastle. To this latter end, the Council adopted Public Participation Policy & Strategy broadens the scope of public participation beyond just the ward committees to the mayor’s office via the budget roadshows and the office of the Speaker via the constituency meetings and to the rest of the departments within NLM whenever there is a need to approach the community about outreach programs or service delivery issues. Chapter 4 of the MSA also deals with admission of the public to Council meetings and sets regulations and guidelines for consultations. Furthermore, it states the numerous ways communication to the public should occur and this includes the use of local newspapers, radio broadcasts and official notices. However, despite all these structures in place, officials within the public participation unit remain frustrated with just playing a ‘mouthpiece’ role while officials outside the Unit fail to grasp the importance of its mandate. All this stems from frustrated citizens that either see the adopted mechanisms as lacklustre and leading to inefficient service delivery or just a compliance exercise leading to similar consequences.

Drawing from a qualitative methodology, the aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of public participation mechanisms on service delivery within the Newcastle Local Municipality. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

i. To investigate the effectiveness of the various public participation mechanisms on service delivery in the Newcastle Local Municipality.

ii. To evaluate the challenges faced by municipal officials in efficiently implementing public participation within the Newcastle Local Municipality.

iii. To make recommendations to better the level of understanding the citizens of Newcastle possess with regards to their roles and responsibilities in the decision-making processes of the municipality.
Literature Review

Analysing the model of public participation developed by citizen activist, Bishop & Davis (2002) advocated for the analogy of a ‘ladder of participation’, starting at the lowest level with manipulation to the highest level of citizen control. This somewhat radical view of public participation implicitly holds a no-nonsense view that disregards token communication towards civil society and demands the transfer of actual policy influencing power from government to the public. Munzhedzi (2020) noted that this radical public participation in the form of a real transfer of power from government to the masses is only practically feasible within the election phase, that at the operational level of implementing service delivery, it is not a pragmatic solution. One of main reasons for this lack of practical usefulness is the fact that like their private sector counterparts, public officials require specialized knowledge to carry out mostly technically complicated tasks. Pateman (2012) concur that coupled with the needed level of further decentralization beyond local government and to the masses, adds numerous issues within an already vastly complex public policy space. In an ideal representative model, members of the community do not directly influence policy choices like an elected municipal council member, instead they form or join organized civil society groups thus increasing their chances of being heard and indirectly influencing policy decisions. Within the South African context, local government refers to municipalities of which there are currently 278; 8 metropolitans, 44 district and 226 local and each one of these local government institutions require their own tailor-made public participation strategies, to allow for effective implementation (Mangu, 2003). According to Auriccombe & Sithomola (2020) democratically elected officials and hired public officials, all municipal officials embody the public participation mandate bestowed on municipal councils and so it is with the public official in local government to initiate and develop the vital communication link between the municipality and its constituency.

The main tool that the upper branches of government have given local government to develop and nurture a relationship with its community, is the ward committee structure. National government has taken some informed steps in ensuring that communities are better organized for participative purposes through the introduction of a variety of pieces of legislation, methods and mechanisms that guide the establishment of structures intended to represent communities in municipal affairs. Representative democracy in local government requires a pro-active approach to public participation in municipal decision-making processes and real participatory democracy depends on citizens who denounce political apathy that can engage in political discussions as informed and capacitated citizens. Public participation and citizen engagement are vital for participatory democracy within regards to developmental local government (Mogale, 2005). Public participation means the direct ways in which citizens influence and exercise control in local government and that this helps facilitate collective action between municipalities and their communities as it raises awareness on developmental accountability by civil society (Van der Waldt, 2007).

The democratic and developmental nature of local government in South Africa is mainly realized through public participation with the legislative framework for local government strongly underpinning the participatory requirement for municipalities. This is initially stated in section 152(1) of the Constitution (RSA 1996), establishing and mandating representative democracy as the object of local government via stating that the objectives of local government are most importantly ‘to provide democratic and accountable government for local communities’ and ‘to encourage the involvement of communities and community organizations in the matters of local government’ (RSA 1996). Furthermore, municipal councils are responsible for enhancing local democracy and promoting broad socio-economic development through active community engagement that contributes to the fulfillment of the public participation mandate (Fourie & Van der Waldt, 2021).

Public participation, at its core acknowledges that involving stakeholders in decision-making about their communities and broader social issues has important socio-economic and societal benefits. It is for this reason that the failure of services cannot only be attributed to the works technical nature but can also be caused by a lack of accountability of public, private and non-profit organizations to community members (Lancaster, 2018). In other words, some service delivery initiatives fail due to a break-down in the relationship between citizens, policy makers and service providers which is specifically the issue community participation attempts to remedy. It is for this reason that public participation scholars like Swanepoel and De Beer (2012) stress the fact that planning must commence with the attainment of the perspectives of the community members to whom the development initiative is aimed at. Development that makes use of this step as its starting point achieves the vital outcome of participatory service delivery, which is the encouragement of self-reliant development. By paying attention to the voices of those most affected by a proposed public policy solution, a solid & relevant knowledge foundation is created for development (Naaido & Ramphal, 2018). The mistaken approach of viewing community members simply as receivers of information as an after-thought is to engage in the ‘non-participation; and ‘degrees of tokenism’ form of public participation. Truly effective participation requires involvement not only in information gathering but also in analysis, decision-making and implementation. This can then lead to the more thorough ‘degrees of citizen power’ form of public participation which will in turn lead to an improvement in accountability both financial and political (Fourie & Van der Waldt, 2021).

Research and Methodology

Research Approach

This study has made use of the qualitative research approach that involves carrying out a detailed investigation into a research subject or variable where the researcher will gather a range of data from multiple sources of information via different data collection methods,
and over a period. Qualitative research is more commonly than not, associated with an inductive approach, where a real-life and evolving research design is used to add to an already existing body of knowledge (Kivunja and Kuyani, 2017). Thematic analysis is the process of identifying common themes within collected qualitative data (Creswell and Poth, 2016). Making use of the continuum perspective of public participation, theoretical assumptions based on that framework were tested against the empirical results of this study provided by the participants. The raw data, collected directly from the participants, will be recorded and then transcribed in a vigilant manner which will be followed by the application of the thematic analysis method.

**Target Population, Sampling, and Sample Size**

Development of a sampling framework enables the researcher to make a list of all participants that would give impact to the study (Yin, 2009). In relation to this study, municipal officials within the public participation unit in the NLM served as the eyes and ears of the municipality and the ward committee secretaries assisted in providing both the municipal and community perspectives as elected members of the community that volunteered to assist in implementing effective public participation. The study sample size consisted of 10 individuals that were purposively selected. The Newcastle Local Municipality has jurisdiction over 34 wards which are split into four zones, namely the Town zone, Madadeni zone, Osizweni zone and the Blaubosch zone. Therefore, to allow for overall representation that takes into consideration issues from all zones within Newcastle, two ward committee secretaries from two wards within each zone were selected, making a total of 8 ward committee members. The perspective of the municipal officials was provided for within the last two slots by the Integrated Development Plan Manager and the Public Participation Manager, thus completing the 10-person sample size.

**Research Instrument**

Semi-structured interviews are suitable for both quantitative and qualitative studies and so have been chosen as the data collection method for this study. Semi-structured interviews enable exploratory discussions that allow the researcher not only to understand the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ but also to understand the more nuanced and in-depth aspects of the research topic. Furthermore, a semi-structured interview schedule takes advantage of both structured and unstructured interview aspects in that the researcher can make use of closed questions with the option of asking the participants to elaborate on their answers (Creswell and Poth, 2016). Thus, this research study made use of a semi-structured interview schedule with the municipal officials, interviewed individually and the ward committee secretaries interviewed in pairs as per zone. The following are advantages of face-to-face Interviews in case study research:

i. they allow for more in-depth data collection and comprehensive understanding
ii. the body language and facial expressions are more clearly identified and understood
iii. the interviewer can probe for explanations of responses
iv. the stimulus material and visual aids can be used to support the interview
v. the interview length can be considerably longer since the participant has a greater commitment to participate (Leavy, 2014).

**Results, Interpretation, and Discussion of Findings**

**Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to present an analysis and provide a detailed discussion of the results obtained using a semi-structured interview schedule. The research approach made use of in this study was an in-depth, qualitative approach that sought to investigate the effectiveness of public participation mechanisms on service delivery in the Newcastle Local Municipality. The aim was to examine and analyse the perceptions and views of community members and municipal officials on the effectiveness of the participation tools employed by the municipality in improving the delivery of basic services to citizens. The primary data gathering tool during the research work was semi-structured interviews with participants selected from the residents of Newcastle.

**The Demographic Data**

This section is an expression of the biographical information of the 10 participants in the form of gender, age and population group.

**Gender Distribution**

Information pertaining to gender statistics was collected to acknowledge the disparate way adequate and inadequate service delivery affects the different genders. As part of the marginalized groups in society, the sufficient representation of women in the sample was warranted. The study had an even distribution of men and woman with each gender occupying 50% of the participants spots.
Table 1: Gender Distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Participants of The Study, 2022

Population Group Distribution

The ethnic and racial nature of the spatial distribution of the people of South Africa is currently an inescapable feature due to the intentional design of pre-1994 leaders and the underwhelming rectifying efforts of the democratic administrations that have come after (Mangu, 2003). This has had far reaching implications on the nature, frequency, quality and level of service delivery between different communities within the country. The data sample had to acknowledge and incorporate this.

Table 2: Population Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Participants of The Study, 2022

The aspiring city of Newcastle is located within the KwaZulu-Natal province which is home to an African population of 86.8%, with the national ratio at 80%. The study consisted of 8 Africans, 1 Caucasian and 1 Indian. In this way, Newcastle and this research’s sample are a sufficient statistical expression of the community within its area and country at large.

Age Distribution

Age distribution data was collected to investigate whether there was any correlation between age and understanding the concept of public participation and one’s role in it. The results indicated that just under a third (30%) of participants were aged 18-29 years. Within the 30 - 41 age group, 40% (4) of the participants were accounted for and participants aged within the 42 - 53 age group accounted for the remaining 30% (3). The two first categories, (18 - 29) years and (30 – 41) years were significantly dominant and this reflects an existence of a youthful population which has implications for the dependency ratio.

Table 3: Age Distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 – 29</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 – 41</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42 - 53</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Participants of The Study, 2022

Primary Data Collection and Analysis

As this was a qualitative study, the researcher opted to make use of the thematic analysis method to explore the results. Thematic analysis is particularly useful when looking for subjective information such as a participant’s experiences, views, and opinions, which is why it is usually conducted on data derived from interviews and conversation as was the case with this research (Leavey, 2014). Thematic analysis allows the researcher to systematically engage with and analyse numerous accounts received from the participants to identify any emerging themes and previously unknown revelations (Creswell, 2016). Themes can be described as abstract concepts which the researcher engages in identifying throughout the research stages, but with specific attention provided to it in this section.
Theme 1 - Ward Level Service Delivery

The primary concern of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of various public participation mechanisms on service delivery in the Newcastle Local Municipality and this effectiveness, it was assumed, would be evident (or not) based on how satisfied (or not) the residents of Newcastle are with said level of service delivery. Public participation is directly linked to perceptions of service delivery satisfaction (Auriacombe & Sithomola, 2020). Public participation is a vital component of a democratic country and good governance as democratic decision-making is based on the principle that every citizen who is affected, or might be affected, by a governance-related decision has the right to participate in government decision-making processes (Auriacombe & Sithomola, 2020). Participants, consisting mostly of ward committee members and low management municipal workers, acknowledged the municipality’s efforts with regards to public participation mechanisms but mostly felt they were not enough. 60% of the ward committee members expressed a sense of feeling marginalized in a role they were told would render them part of the local government decision-making machinery.

“uMaspala (the municipality) hired us as its voice and ears to umphakathi (the community) but when there are projects in my ward, I am the last to know and so I don’t know...angazi what to tell the community when people we don’t know here in our ward, are the ones that work...so no I am not happy with how service delivery happens la (here)...ya”. — participant 5

Participants residing mostly in Newcastle ‘West’ (40%) expressed a more optimistic view of service delivery in their wards, stating they feel the bare minimum is fulfilled in the form of basic needs. Developmental endeavours, however, were seen to be inconsistent and ill-informed as little to no communication is had with community members.

“In my experience, we do receive the basics...water, energy etc fairly well so I am okay with service delivery in that sense kodwa (but), things that will give us a better future like jobs and infrastructure to grow businesses yabo (you see), I think this is lacking”. — participant 1

In their study, Lowndes, Pratchett & Stoker (2001), stressed the importance of municipalities gaining citizens’ views and noted that council decisions were likely to be better informed if they were linked to participation exercises which subsequently led to service delivery improvements. This is regarding both community perceptions and empirical service delivery progress.

Theme 2 – The Usefulness of Public Participation

Many a study have been undertaken to stress the importance of public participation in influencing positive service delivery. Within the South African context, the ward committee structure is meant to assist the elected councillor of a ward to instil a culture of participatory democracy which must enhance effective public participation (Naidoo & Ramphal, 2018). The effectiveness of said public participation can assist municipalities in several ways, including but not limited to eliminating major challenges like corrupt practices, power struggles, and community unrest.

When asked about the public participation mechanisms made use of in their municipality, 100% of the participants mentioned public meetings, ward committee meetings and the mayor’s budget road shows. Just over 50% listed four to five mechanisms and only 30% listed six or more mechanisms. Creighton (2005), explores the payoffs of a good public participation framework and its implementation, noting amongst many benefits; the improved quality of policy decisions, consensus building & buy-in and developing civil society.

In other words, an informed citizenry has a positive effect on the possibility of successfully implementing public policy. If said success incorporates a positive service delivery experience according to the citizens of any given municipality, then the importance of public participation cannot be stressed enough. Developing an informed civil society is and must be a double-edged sword because it is empowering an entity (civil society) that must learn to hold government accountable. Failure to realise this can lead to societal discontent and a negative view of service delivery as expressed by one of the participants when asked about the Batho Pele principles that govern public officials:

“Yes we..I know the Batho Pele standards...Access, Redress, Accountability, unn value for money oh oh and Consultation of course, eh Courtesy and all that. Kodwa (but), does the municipal workers know them because mina (me) I do not think so. Where is the value for money in our roads? With Eskom? And Maspala (municipal) workers are rude and only account to their branches not us in the community”. — participant 7

One of the main functions of the ward committee structure is to make the municipal council aware of the needs and concerns of the community, and keep the community informed of developments in the municipal council thus forming a vital bridge between these stakeholders (Fourie & Van de Waldt, 2021:8). Keeping this structure well informed by capacitating individual ward committee members, plays an important role in the successful implementation of the public participation mandate.

“uMaspala uyazi ukuthi (the municipality knows that...) they must talk to us as umphakathi (the community) before they bring projects into our ward areas, I know they know ngoba (because) they do that sometimes and my confusion is when they don’t, then me as the ward committee must answer why this time they didn’t? is it corruption or what? Am I involved too? That is what my neighbours ask me”. — participant 9
The participants displayed a clear understanding of the advantages of properly implemented public participation, alluding to how it made their jobs easier and protected their integrity and legitimacy as community leaders. Discussing the preservation of credibility & legitimacy in public policy, Creighton (2005) states that, the way to achieve and maintain legitimacy, is to follow a decision-making process that is transparent & involves the public.

**Theme 3 – Challenges to Effective Public Participation**

Most participants (90%) identified a lack of resources and time as the main factors inhibiting the effective implementation of public participation. Lowndes et al (2001) noted that unfortunately the administrative task of implementing public participation often finds itself in competition with urgent service delivery issues with regards to the need for financial resources. This coupled with the lack of time afforded to municipal public participation initiatives, left many of the participants feeling overwhelmed.

“You must understand, the members of the community are always angry because they don’t have money just like us, they are struggling too. So, mina (me) as a ward committee member must answer these people when they see there is no service delivery or only the friends of iKhansela (Councillor) is getting jobs when projects come. Then mina (me) I go there with no PPE no police safety, ngapha noMaspala (on the other hand, the municipality) is busy with meetings left, right and centre but they pay us peanuts”. — participant 10

In their study looking into factors that affected public participation effectiveness in municipal service delivery, Naidoo & Ramphal (2018) noted that transparency and accountability positively affected public participation efforts. On the opposite end, with regards to factors that impede effective public participation, they noted the presence of power struggles as the main culprit. When asked about the challenges participants faced in pursuit of effective public participation this sentiment of municipal leaders focusing on power struggles was raised by 70% of the ward committees.

“We don’t feel like we get enough support from the municipality because for starters the stipend we get is not enough at all, we don’t have pens and notepads like the ones before us and nje (just) we don’t think of abaphathi (the leaders) take us seriously ngoba (because) they are too busy fighting other parties if not each other enkundleni eyodwa (in one party)” — participant 4

A spatial aspect to the study became evident in the results with regards to the community’s interest in public participation initiatives. 35% of the participants predominantly from one area (Newcastle west), which is the suburban side of the city, noted a lack of interest in public participation by the citizens. They spoke of a consistently lacklustre attendance of public meetings and a low voter turnout in ward committee elections and by-elections. Lowndes et al (2001) note that this issue challenges the municipal authorities to not only develop public participation initiatives but to also involve a framework that focuses on stimulating the public’s interest in this vital endeavour.

Participants that work within the municipality (20%) acknowledged their inclusion in municipal affairs as public servants but still expressed moderate satisfaction with service delivery in their wards due to difficulties they faced in implementing public participation within the municipality. The lack of understanding, with regards to the importance of public participation, of their fellow colleagues contributed to inefficient public participation implementation.

“It has been a struggle just to get Council to adopt a Public Participation, a feat I am proud to have been instrumental in achieving but that was only half the battle won. Fellow staff members seemingly do not understand that the public participation mandate is literally enshrined in the Constitution and so most of my time is spent appeasing a community about specific projects they know little about because the implementing department did not bother to talk to the community about it at first”. — participant 8

**Recommendations and Findings**

**Key Findings**

**Public Participation as a Continuum**

This study has attempted to make use of the ‘continuum’ or ‘ladder of participation’ concept as its overarching theoretical framework. This continuum perspective allows one to assess the proposed public participation mechanisms over a wide spectrum that assesses the level of real decision-making power each ‘rung’ on the ladder affords the citizens (Bishop & Davis, 2002). The ladder has eight stages of participation which are subdivided into three categories and the aim in making use of this perspective was to ascertain in which category the Newcastle Local Municipality would fit in depending on the findings of the study.

Based on this continuum criterion the NLM has exhibited characteristics of a government institution that predominantly engages in informing and consulting with the community in a top-down manner, thus falling within the “degrees of tokenism” category. The masses are thus fed information and listened to in public meetings or forums but given no actual power on the final decision and direction of the policy in question. The end goal here is placation and appeasement (Pateman, 1999).

**Public Participation in Local Government**

As far as the standard & legislated requirements for public participation for a local municipality, NLM possesses a ward committee structure that averages an 80% functionality index according to quarterly provincial assessments (Madi, 2016). This ward committee
Public Participation in Developmental Local Government

Recognizing the importance of socio-economic development within the local government sphere, a formal integrated planning approach was established in South Africa by the democratic leaders. This approach acknowledged the need for these development priorities to come from the communities that required them, meaning that communities should participate directly in planning their service delivery requirements (Fourie & Van der Waldt, 2021). Therefore, a co-operative system of governance between all three spheres of government was adopted that incentivised these spheres to align, integrate and coordinate their planning efforts. Thus, the National Development Plan: Vision 2030 (NDP) serves as the national overarching strategic framework for development planning. Provincially, the Provincial Growth and Development Plans are tailor made by each of the nine provinces for their respective community needs but must of course align to the development priorities of the NDP (Fourie & Van der Waldt, 2021). Finally, municipal planning is the most detailed operational level of planning, as it aims to address everyday socio-economic development issues at the local government level.

The official planning document of municipalities is the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), and all local municipalities must possess a Council adopted IDP for each financial year, which must, in turn, be aligned with the growth and development plans of province & subsequently the NDP. In this regard NLM also has a fully functional Integrated Development Planning (IDP) Unit that consistently produces a credible IDP document through the implementation of a Council adopted Process Plan, Steering Committee and IDP Forum. The IDP forum is where ward committees and organized members of society are given an opportunity to voice their concerns and/or suggestions on what this municipal ‘super plan’, the IDP document should incorporate. Furthermore, NLM develops ward level Community Based Plans (CBP) in order to ensure the grassroot source of development needs is community specific. However, despite all these measures the disjuncture between community needs and the correct remedial actions is still very evident in NLM.

Public Participation in Local Government Service Delivery

As the sphere of government that is closest to the people, municipalities bear the responsibility of providing these communities with service delivery that at the least ensures their basic needs are met. The South African government adopted the Batho Pele principles as the ultimate guide to public service officials in serving their respective communities. NLM exhibited good adherence to at least half (4 of 8) of these principles, namely, Consultation, courtesy, access & information. Keeping in line with the general trend of allowing the community to access information which however, they can find little use for as issues of openness & transparency, service standards & value for money seem to escape the municipality more than it gets it right.

In their assessment of factors that promote service delivery in municipalities & those that impede it, Naidoo & Ramphal (2018) specifically point to leaders focusing on power struggles instead of the work at hand as the single most detrimental factor to service delivery. This is further supported by the damning allegations brought against the municipality by the Special Investigations Unit (SIU) in June 2022, with regards to a myriad of Irregular, fruitless & wasteful expenditure incidents. This has had a direct impact on service delivery with the masses very aware of such happenings.

Basically, NLM has mastered the “degrees of tokenism” strategy of public participation however, years of exposing members of the community to this powerless participation strategy has led to an incremental rise in general dissatisfaction. Therefore, most participants within this study expressing unhappiness with service delivery within their respective wards. Evidently this has occurred in conjunction with increasing levels of complacency amongst the appointed and elected officials of the municipality to detrimental results.

With 100% of the participants expressing low to moderate satisfaction with public participation and thus service delivery efforts in their respective wards, the finding was that NLM fell within the “degrees of tokenism” category.

Lack of Public Participation Leads to Lack of Service Delivery Satisfaction

Public participation refers to the focused efforts of government entities in ensuring the community they serve is duly informed and consulted in process of service delivery within that institution’s jurisdiction (Heywood, 2007). The Municipal Systems Act and Municipal Structures Act both guide and provide local government with various public participation tools. The results of the study showed that NLM complied with the essential requirements of both these pieces of legislation in that the municipality has a functional ward structure and relevant public participation policy.

Community placed participants however, expressed the fact that despite the compliance exhibited by the municipality, they still saw a significant disjuncture between the municipality’s efforts and service delivery. Whereas the municipality approach the community and informed its citizens of numerous projects and service delivery issues, feedback once that first step had been taken was almost
non-existent. This result speaks to the municipality’s practice of “degrees of tokenism” and how effective implementation programmes needed to be a point of focus to improve public participation (Auriacombe & Sithomola, 2020).

An informed and Educated Citizenry is Good for Public Participation and Service Delivery

One of the objectives of this study was to better understand the role which the community plays in the effective implementation of public participation & service delivery. Creighton (2005) argues that the communication requires of public participation at its core coupled with the various stakeholders involved in the work of government means the focus cannot only be on the public services but also on civil society. These two major stakeholders need to be formidable partners and sometimes adversaries all in service of improving service delivery.

Thus, the study highlighted both the positive effects of a well-informed ward committee structure as well as the detriments of the opposite as it became evident that the mostly ‘one way traffic’ approach the municipality has gotten used to, left the ward committees frustrated and possibly in harm’s way. However, in the same breath the municipality had equipped the ward committee members enough for them to know that this was a mistake by the municipality, and it needs to correct this.

Challenges to Effective Public Participation

The third objective of this study was in relation to understanding the challenges inhibiting effective and efficient public participation within NLM and in a trend seen globally with public participation struggles, the first and most prevalent finding alluded to a lack of resources. Both the officials within the municipality and the ward committee members expressed a shortage of financial & human resources and general tools of trade. Lowndes et al (2001) points to a general government issue were good governance functions find themselves competing for and losing resources to revenue making functions. This is borne in a fundamental misunderstanding of the foundation the good governance aspect lays down for all other functions of government.

The fundamental cause of the above-mentioned challenge is also the reason for another result of this study, namely that non-public participation officials fail to understand the importance of this function and thus undermine the work that the IDP and Public Participation managers are trying to do. This lack of understanding also manifests in the community at large in the form of apathetic citizens who fail to play their role in the making of a participant and accountable municipality (Naidoo & Ramphal, 2018)

Finally, and again in a deep undermining of the importance of good governance, is the way leaders (political and administrative) lose focus of the fundamental aim of the work of government and instead focus on power struggles. The study has shown that this challenge is possibly key in causing the discrepancy between a seemingly well-equipped public participation and IDP department and the inconsistent service delivery results. If the highest decision-making bodies are focused on personal grudges and fraudulent activities, then it is the community at large that suffers from an inept local government.

Conclusion

The field of public participation has gradually gained importance within academia and world governments at large and South Africa is no exception to this trend. The democratic leaders of this young nation recognized the importance of community involvement in government functions. Within the local sphere of government, it was acknowledged that as the level closest to the people, municipalities had to act as the custodians of developmental government that endorsed participatory development with a focus on grassroots level issue identification. The concept of public participation was thus enshrined in numerous local government legislation with the understanding that this would build a healthy relationship between municipalities & their constituencies. However, this seemingly has not been the case, within NLM, as with the national trend, this relationship is strained, with periodic strikes and dismal financial & service delivery performances year after year. This study attempted to gain a better understanding of how a municipality like NLM that ticked all the legislative requirement boxes when it came to public participation, still faced an unhappy community and inconsistent service delivery achievements. Through a qualitative enquiry, the reasons for this apparent failure were investigated through an analysis of the public participation mechanisms made use of in NLM and how the community experienced the NLM strategy. Along with evidence from a literature review it came to light that NLM seemingly practices a “degree of tokenism” type of public participation that does not sufficiently ensure a thorough type of public participation that gives its citizens actual power to affect the decisions made about their livelihood. Facing numerous challenges internally and externally, NLM found that despite its efforts, the great work done internally by the custodian departments did not translate to the community at large. Recommendations were thus made to address the issues of internal and external apathy in the form of outreach programs and workshops. Fundamental education on public participation and good governance at large was suggested to instil an everlasting culture of public participation and upstanding governance for decades to come.

Recommendations

Taking into consideration the situation with regards to public participation within the Newcastle Local Municipality (NLM), it is possible to make the following recommendations.
Public Participation Policy Review and Expansion

NLM, from an administrative standpoint has a good public participation programme that is bolstered up by the relevant legislation and municipal policies. This has allowed the municipality to be very efficient in one sided communication via feeding the masses the necessary information for compliance. The problem with this strategy is how it neglects actual implementation of effective public participation. To this end the municipality needs to develop a public participation implementation plan to accompany the policy to better engage the community. The implementation plan must include a reporting element that will incentivise the municipality actively report to the community on a regular basis thus giving the latter more input in important decision along the way. Finally, the incorporation of a Project Prioritization Model in conjunction to the already present Ward Based Plans (CBPs) would greatly assist the municipality at large in ensuring the correct issues are addressed at the ward specific level.

Community Outreach Programme on Public Participation

As noted in one of the findings of this study, political apathy amongst the populace in Newcastle is a challenge that threatens the function of an important stakeholder within the public participation platform. NLM has made significant efforts at equipping its ward committees which has yielded positive result. It is thus suggested that this education also be extended to civil society at large to render the ward committee structure more efficient and give it more legitimacy in the eyes of the public as what the structure knows will also be available to the masses. The focus of such campaign can be the following:

i. Educating citizens of their rights & responsibilities in the municipality’s development program including the rights to participate and to be given feedback of municipal program.

ii. Informing citizens of all the available public participation mechanisms which they can use to approach the municipality.

iii. Educating the community on the importance of the Municipal Systems Act, the Municipal Structures Act and the Municipal Finance Management Act.

Regular Internal Workshops on Public Participation

The issue of apathy when it comes to public participation evidently does not affect the community only but as the findings demonstrated, officials within the municipality are also afflicted with this illness. To this end the municipality needs dedicated leaders to institute mandatory workshops with the aim of cultivating a public participation culture within the municipality at large. These workshops must focus on instilling a philosophical appreciation for good governance and public participation to invoke a deep passion for this vital function. Once the leaders and all officials at large understand this importance then issues of power struggles and a lack of resource allocation for this function can also be subsequently addressed.

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