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Participatory communication in South African municipal government: Matlosana local municipality's Integrated Development Plan (IDP) processes

ABSTRACT

The South African Municipal Systems Act (2000) directs South Africa's municipalities to ensure that it uses IDP processes as a form of public participation in its affairs. This qualitative study was conducted in Jouberton Township in the Matlosana local municipality, North West Province, to assess the extent to which participatory communication takes place in municipal IDP processes. Using participant observation, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, the study found that community members were passive participators in municipal IDP processes in which their involvement was limited to being informed about what would happen or had already happened. Dialogue was facilitated through a top-down modernisation-based approach, and no evidence emerged of community empowerment in decision making regarding development projects. The findings suggest a need for the application of bottom-up participatory communication and "empowered" participation during municipal IDP processes. They also suggest a need for further research on how "participation as an end" can be theorised in line with participatory communication in a complex municipal system that already requires "participation as a means" to achieve certain goals.

INTRODUCTION

Much research has been reported on the role played by communication for development and social change (or "development communication") in so-called third world countries (see Mefalopulos, 2008; Melkote & Steeves, 2015; Waisbord, 2003; Tufte, 2017). It has tended to focus on practical aspects of how "civic agency-led" participation can bring about development through socio-centric processes in, for instance, non-governmental organisations and other social movements (see Chambers, 1994; Tapscott, 2010, 2011; Tufte, 2017). Ways in which information and communication technology can be used to address the digital divide have also been explored as well as the use of media-centric approaches to bring innovation to rural communities (Manyozo, 2006, 2008; Tufte, 2017) as part of social change. To the researcher's knowledge, however, less attention has been devoted to examining "public-institutionalised" development communication in the form of public participation in government development projects, and its application in practice

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as the local government works with communities to ensure public accountability and civic-led empowerment as well as development.

Although academic studies relating to participatory budgeting (PB) processes in Brazil (Tranjan, 2012; Tufte, 2017) have yielded insights into how communities can use participatory communication strategies to inform government policies on development and social change, little has been found in the scholarly literature on similar processes in South Africa. Only two studies in the South African context can be pointed to as examples of research conducted where participatory communication for development and social change are examined in local government since the publication of the 1997 White Paper on Local Government (see Msibi & Penzhorn, 2010; Molale, 2014).

In South Africa, local government is directly responsible for facilitating national and provincial community-led development efforts. Section 153 of the country's Constitution specifies that "a municipality must structure and manage its administration and budgeting and planning processes to give priority to the basic needs of the community and to promote the social and economic development of the community" (South Africa, 1996). Accordingly, the Municipal Systems Act (Act 32 of 2000) requires all municipalities to develop an Integrated Development Plan (IDP) to address the development needs of the individuals and communities living within their boundaries. An Integrated Development Plan (IDP) is a document that details how a municipality will strategically and continually align all its development objectives and financial plans aimed at improving the development status of communities within its jurisdiction in a given time-frame (Mazinyo, Omar & Karodia, 2014; Molepo & Maleka, 2018) The Act provides municipalities with principles to follow on how IDPs should be developed and applied (South Africa, 2000), and these include public participation, community buy-in and involvement with what is happening on the ground, and the creation of conditions for the community to identify with community development projects.

Perhaps the use of buzzwords such as "participation", "empowerment", and "poverty alleviation" in the realm of public administration may not reflect the actual nature of the interaction between local government and its communities. This might explain why local municipalities have, in the last few years, suffered unrest and violent protests that are often associated with the destruction of public property. A study by Alexander et al. (2018) has shown that between 2005 and 2017 South Africa experienced over fourteen thousand (14,000) community protests that can be characterised as "disruptive" or "violent".

At core, these protests have been related to inadequacies or absence of service delivery (c.f. Marais et al., 2008; Alexander et al., 2018), which suggests the people's disengagement with development projects and distance between the communities and public programmes designed to serve their needs. The present study set out to ascertain the extent to which community participation and engagement have been optimally facilitated. It has employed the theory of development communication, which espouses participatory communication (and its principles of participation, dialogue and empowerment) to explore the extent to which participatory communication is experienced during the process of developing and implementing municipal IDP processes, using as a case study the Jouberton Township in the Matlosana local municipality,

North West Province. This is a semi-urban township and has also experienced protests, violence and unrest related to service delivery (or lack, thereof). The following questions guided this research:

- What characterised the procedural communication in which this municipality communicated within the IDP framework?
- What were the perceptions of the nature of this communication among stakeholders (the city council, the community, and ward councillors) in the township?

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 Matlosana Municipality

Matlosana Municipality is located in the Dr Kenneth Kaunda District of South Africa's North West Province. It comprises the towns of Klerksdorp, Hartbeesfontein, Orkney and Stilfontein. Located on the N12 highway, which links with the provinces of Gauteng to the east and Northern Cape to the south-west, it serves more than 400,000 inhabitants.

The history of the district predates the gold rush of 1885, and the region has developed into a modern industrial hub. The pillars of its vibrant economy are the mining and agricultural industries, which account for more than a quarter of the province's GDP (South Africa, 2016). The present study focuses on Extension 24 of the Jouberton township of Matlosana. With reference to the chosen study area, the municipality's IDP documents reveal that it is still working towards ensuring that basic service delivery issues are addressed such as providing all citizens with electricity as well as erecting high mast lights. Regarding older projects undertaken in the area, the 2015/16 IDP review document shows a backlog of 1,489 households needing electricity. In Its 2017/2022 IDP review document, the municipality indicates that it has "provided 99% of households in formalised human settlements" with electricity. However no reference is made to any specific area and no indication is made to suggest that the backlog identified the previous year has been addressed.

The 2017/2022 review of the Matlosana local municipality's IDP document also identifies the need to "consult with the community to ensure that needs are correctly determined, explained and included in the IDP for service delivery purposes" (South Africa, 2016). In addition, this area under study was purposively selected in order to also allow the researcher to provide personal insights since qualitative research allows for the researcher to apply self-reflectivity as part of the research process (Tracy, 2013).

1.2 Legislative background: Participation in municipal IDP processes

The Municipal Systems Act (No. 32 of 2000) legislates for public participation by stipulating that each municipality should "encourage and create conditions, for the local community to participate in the affairs of the municipality". These affairs include the preparation,

implementation and review of an Integrated Development Plan (IDP) – a process that requires public participation.

In addition, among the objectives of local government, South Africa's Constitution (At 108 of 1996) specifies the provision of democratic and accountable government for local communities and encourages the involvement of communities and community organisations in local government matters (South Africa, 1996). Municipalities are thereby expected to help to create an enabling environment for communities to participate in municipal activities (Leboea, 2003; Mubangizi & Gray, 2010).

Effective and meaningful community participation in municipal IDP processes, however, remains a challenge that municipalities are struggling to achieve (Brynard, 1996; Leboea, 2003; Ababio, 2004; Williams, 2006). For example, Williams (2006) underscores that participation practices in local government are characterised by a lack of public accountability, unequal power between citizens and officials, self-serving tendencies that lead to clashes, and a propensity on the part of municipal officials to expect the public to remain docile and act as mere ratifiers of government plans.

It may well be that a communication problem exists – which would explain why in practice, "community participation" is viewed as a one-way process of information dissemination about pre-determined plans (i.e. in line with modernisation theory, the modernisation paradigm of development communication). Against this background, this study attempts to examine the nature of the communication experienced specifically in municipal IDP processes to unearth perceptions of stakeholders in these processes.

2. THEORETICAL POINT OF DEPARTURE: PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION

The field of development communication (or communication for development and social change) dates back to the early 1920s, but the aspect of participatory communication became a focus from the late 1970s for researchers reacting to failures of international development projects, which they suggested were caused by reliance on a modernisation paradigm of development and social change, characterised by media-centric theories and behaviour change models to deliver development mainly in the so-called "Third-World" countries.

The modernisation paradigm was criticised for placing responsibility and blame on developing countries themselves for being unable to reach their development goals, and thereby remain "under-developed" (Mefalopulos, 2008; Melkote & Steeves, 2015; Tufte, 2017). Introducing participatory communication into development projects, therefore, in Boafo's (2006:42) terms, "translates into individuals being active in development programmes and processes; they contribute ideas, take initiatives and articulate their needs and their problems, while asserting their autonomy". However, complex power relationships and imbalances between, for instance, municipal authorities and community members or between international donor agencies (e.g. the International Monetary Fund or USAID) and developing nations (e.g. South Africa or Zimbabwe)

may affect how participatory communication is understood in practice. In addition, these factors may also be the cause of the existing theory and practice gap in participatory communication (cf. Muturi & Mwangi, 2009), particularly considering the fact that "participation" is defined and interpreted differently by different stakeholders (cf. Eversole, 2003; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009).

According to the participatory communication approach to development communication, change and development cannot come in a community unless "beneficiaries" partake in dialogic and communicative processes aimed at empowering them to actively participate in decision-making processes about important life-changing development projects. It views three themes, namely, participation, dialogue, and empowerment, as essential variables to consider when assessing the extent to which participatory communication is practised in a developmental process (Mefalopulos, 2008; Melkote & Steeves, 2015; Tufte, 2017).

In this way, dialogue, participation and empowerment are used to characterise participatory communication as a dialogic, communicative and mutually empowering process aimed at enabling stakeholders (i.e. beneficiaries, development planners, donors and municipal authorities) to collaboratively identify local problems and jointly make decisions concerning development projects needed to address the said challenges (cf. Mefalopulos, 2008; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009, Otto & Fourie, 2016) towards long-lasting and positive social change.

It is also worth noting, however, that when studying the literature on "participation" in local government, it is rare for one to come across the concept of "participatory communication" being mentioned. This is despite the fact that communication (i.e. in the form of interpersonal, small group or dialogic engagement) is central, and key, to participation in the said context. Instead, common terms explored in the literature include "community participation", "citizen participation" or "citizen engagement", among others (cf. Ababio, 2004; Tshabalala & Lombard, 2009, Tau, 2013). This adds to the problem that the idea of participation (community engagement or community participation) is to be viewed in isolation, or in disconnect with, participatory communication.

Notwithstanding, given that participatory communication can be criticised based on the fact that is in an ideal and is utopian in nature (cf. Williams, 2004; Pieterse, 1998; Wald, 2014), it would be naïve to consider it as a "panacea" for addressing complex development challenges experienced by local citizens and their day-to-day struggle, alongside municipal authorities, towards social change. Therefore in this study, participatory communication is explored in the context of how participation, dialogue and empowerment are employed during municipal IDP processes.

2.1 Participation

At its heart, participation involves creating platforms that do not constrict inputs from role-players who can shape development agendas. The following typology of participation, as proposed by Mefalopulos (2008:11) describes four different levels of participation that characterise various forms of community/stakeholder (especially beneficiaries) involvement in development initiatives.

- Passive participation – stakeholders are informed about what is going to happen or what has already happened, and feedback is minimal.
- Participation by consultation – stakeholders provide feedback to questions posed by outside researchers or experts. However, this consultative process keeps all the decision-making power in the hands of external professionals.
- Functional participation – stakeholders take part in discussions and analysis of predetermined objectives set by the project. While this kind of participation does not normally result in dramatic changes regarding "what" objectives are to be achieved, it does provide valuable input into "how" to achieve them.
- Empowered participation – stakeholders are willing and able to be part of the process and to participate in joint analysis, which leads to joint decision making about what should be achieved and how.

This typology was adopted in the present study to assess the level of participation of citizens in the Jouberton municipal IDP process and in a sense, help to answer the two research questions. Ideally, when conducting public participatory consultative sessions in the IDP, a municipality needs to ensure that there is "empowered participation" in order to fulfil the legislative and theoretical requirements of citizen participation (Smith, 2003; Tshabalala & Lombard, 2009; Ababio, 2004). The participatory process should be characterised by extensive interpersonal communication and knowledge-sharing (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005) to reduce the possibility of self-serving agendas.

Despite specific reference to "community participation" in the legislation, however, researchers have observed a dearth of informed deliberation and discussion on the quality and suitability of development projects conducted by South African local governments (Williams, 2006; Smith, 2003; Ababio, 2004; Horak, 2006; Mokone, 2007; Tshabalala & Lombard, 2009; Naidoo, 2010). Essentially, participation focuses on allowing different voices to contribute diverse views regarding local development and social change. An assumption guiding participation in participatory communication is that if stakeholders are granted the space for deliberation and decision-making on development projects, the process would be empowering and this will, in turn, enhance the quality of the relationship between municipalities and their communities, as well as create positive social change from the bottom-up.

2.2 Dialogue

Education philosopher Paulo Freire defines dialogue as "the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (Freire, 2000:88). In this way, dialogue is about affording all stakeholders a platform to jointly express themselves in the process of naming the world, and it cannot occur "between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them" (Freire, 2000:88).

Dialogue, as a "dialectical process of moving from thesis to antithesis to synthesis" (Bartlet, 2005:346) is presented as one where people (in their interactions) teach one another, learn

from each other and, in the process, discover things that had been unknown to them all and lead to praxis – a state of transformation of their world.

Since municipalities cannot, without dialogue, perform their legislatively required function of seeking community participation, it is the only platform through which community views and perspectives can be *"qualitatively"* collected. In the IDP context, dialogue is facilitated through public meetings initiated by a municipality. Dialogue, in the context of participatory communication, means that all parties should be afforded equal status as they discuss or express their opinions during all deliberation and decision-making stages. This means that no view or perspective should dominate over others, and no party should be perceived as having control over others (Mefalopulos, 2008). This places emphasis on the idea of empowerment, a theme which will now be discussed.

2.3 Empowerment

Since local government is mandated with improving the quality of life for its citizens, this cannot be achieved without their buy-in, contribution, commitment and support (Ababio, 2004; Melkote & Steeves, 2015). Put differently, community participation and dialogue serve the purpose of ensuring that citizens are empowered from the spaces created for them, individually, to improve their skills by negotiating their needs in forums that are often viewed as obstructive, discouraging and intimidating for them (Tshabalala & Lombard, 2009:397).

In this sense, an empowerment process for community members cannot take place if people, themselves, are vulnerable to coercion or manipulation so that they should accept pre-designed development projects during municipal IDP meetings. On the contrary, empowerment can only be achieved if they have the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes in these meetings and to take part actively in project roll-outs. This view is also supported by Silvio Waisbord's (2005:78) succinct observation that power is central to the conception that community empowerment should be the main goal of development and social change efforts.

3. METHOD

A qualitative approach was used for this study because its aim was to investigate social interactions and explore the meaning that the research subjects ascribed to their participation in the IDP projects in their community. Given that the study's philosophical stance is interpretive in nature, the qualitative methods were used enabled the researcher to explore, and participate in, a process of exploring the "multiple constructions of reality" by diverse opinions in order to understand a phenomenon (Tracy, 2013:40-42) as complex as participatory communication in the context of municipal IDP processes.

The data were collected, sequentially, by means of participant observation, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. After permission had been granted by the municipality,

participant observation was conducted first in order to establish the local concerns and viewpoints and compare them with those in the available literature on participation in local government. Four public IDP meetings were observed, once a week over a period of one month between Matlosana municipal officials and community members, enabling the researcher to unobtrusively view the participants in their natural setting and take field notes. These meetings were attended, on average, by about 50 to 80 residents of different age groups ranging from 40 to 80 years old.

For the focus group interview discussions, a convenience sample of participants was selected from a community of Extension 24 in the Jouberton Township. They were aged between 18 and 60 years, and most were unemployed. Generally, these are the age groups targeted by a municipality, when undertaking integrated development planning, and they fell in the convenient sample selected by the researcher based on their relevance to provide data for answering the second research question. Of the total population of about 300 households in the area, 30 were purposefully selected to participate in the study.

Two semi-structured interviews were then held with the municipal mayor and with the Director for Strategic Planning, Monitoring and Control, the official who was also in charge of the municipal IDP frameworks. The roles of these municipal officials in participatory government are clearly defined and empowered in terms of legislation (Municipal Systems Act, No. 32 of 2000). The aim of the interviews was to explore the nature of communication with communities as understood by these municipal representatives.

Finally, two focus group discussions were conducted, each with about 15 community members, to obtain first-hand accounts of what community members understood to be the nature and extent of their participation in the processes initiated by the municipality. The researcher acted as a facilitator and led the discussions, which yielded 12 hours' worth of recorded data. Comparing the findings of the interviews with those of the focus group discussions made it possible to draw conclusions about the extent to which the experiences of participants overlapped or differed. In addition and as is the case with qualitative research, this method was useful in that it enabled the researcher to obtain rigourous data towards understanding a complex phenomenon and thereby strengthening the study's findings (cf. Tracy, 2013).

The data were analysed according to the three key elements of participatory communication paradigm: participation, dialogue, and empowerment.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data enabled the researcher to explore the extent of participatory communication in the eyes of key role-players in the local government IDP process: that is, the community and the municipal officials. The elements of participation, dialogue, and empowerment encapsulate the legislative requirement of participation in municipal IDP processes and enabled the identification of what was happening in practice during the municipal IDP processes being studied.

4.1 Participation

To assess the extent of participation of key role players in the municipal IDP processes, all participants were asked how involved they were in the selected IDP projects, and at what stage of the projects they got involved. The researcher also considered these questions during field observations, in terms of how the meetings were held and structured, how community members expressed or revealed their participation (for example, their levels of self-confidence and trust in others), and avenues or platforms "created" by the officials for public engagement, deliberation and discussion. Evidence and records used by the municipal officials as proof of (public) participation were also recorded.

Field observation revealed that, after municipal officials had used vehicles with loudhailers to invite community members to the IDP meetings at a tent erected in an open area, most of those who subsequently attended those meetings were estimated to be over the age of 50, and the officials were obliged to speak in their native languages (mainly Setswana and IsiXhosa). This means the youth and middle-aged people did not attend IDP meetings.

Municipal officials, acting as meeting chairs, presented each agenda item to the community members in terms of the development project and projected costs, benefits to the community, and projected completion dates. Those who attended were then given time to comment on these projects, and the process would last for over an hour, with different speakers commenting on different issues. Attendance registers were circulated and later used at council meetings as proof of public participation, thereby fulfilling the legal requirement for citizen participation in IDP deliberations.

Although the officials specified that the meetings were about earmarked IDP projects in the area, most of the community members who attended used the platform to complain about service delivery (or lack thereof), particularly focusing on poor housing delivery, previously failed projects such as road infrastructure upgrades, inadequate refuse collection, lack of entrepreneurial incentives for small enterprises (under the municipality's local economic development plans) and high unemployment rates. This caused meetings to go off topic and reduced the time for proper deliberation and decision-making on the suitability or prioritisation of earmarked IDP projects. In the end, municipal officials would ask for the community to vote by raising their hands whether or not they agreed that the envisaged development projects should go ahead. During field observation, the researcher noted that most community members were unaware of what it means to "participate" in municipal IDP meetings and in addition, they were unable to differentiate between an IDP meeting (where dialogue should ensue and critical decisions about local development projects are taken) and general community meetings with municipal councillors (including ward councillors), where complaints about service delivery issues are supposed to be addressed.

Their "participation", therefore, was facilitated through what Mefalopulos (2008) refers to as "passive participation". This is where community members were merely told about pre-

selected development projects, cost projections, and envisioned benefits for them – that is, they were informed about what was going to happen or "had already happened". This finding confirmed what has been postulated in the literature, that public participation processes in practice are often characterised by spectator politics, with information-sharing exercises with the public who do not participate fully in the development agenda (Leboea, 2003; Williams, 2006; Gwala, 2011; Gwala, Theron & Mchunu, 2015).

In addition, the use of attendance registers to prove that public IDP meetings were held is inadequate, because the mere attendance or presence of role-players in one or two IDP meetings cannot serve as reliable evidence of genuine or active participation by citizens in line with development and social change prescripts. Beyond their presence at such meetings, community members need to engage in joint decision-making processes, consultations and review of project plans throughout the development project cycle. What was observed at the Jouberton IDP meetings did not satisfy the ideal of public participatory processes in which active and empowered participation takes place, in a Freirean sense, and community members are given the latitude to decide on development projects and review project plans throughout the project's cycle (Freire, 2000; Mefalopulos, 2008).

From interviews conducted with municipal officials as well as focus group discussions with community members, contradictions were found on broad issues relating to community participation in IDP consultative frameworks. These included different understandings as to "who" was empowered to make decisions, at what stage the community should participate in the process, and where and when its participation should be limited. For example, on the one hand, municipal officials (during semi-structured interviews) stated that they are empowered (by legislation) to make decisions and to ratify development projects at council level, while on the other hand, community members (during focus group discussions) indicated that they are empowered (i.e. by the constitution) to inform, and benefit from, all local government project development.

During focus group discussions, the researcher asked some younger participants about their lack of participation, and some of them revealed that they saw no direct impact of IDP meetings in their lives. One of the focus group discussion respondents indicated that: "people who attend these meetings are either those seeking basic services, such as RDP houses, or those having queries regarding electricity disconnections, levies or those seeking rent subsidies".

This finding corresponds with one key observation during the participant observation phase, regarding instances where some community members were unable to differentiate between a general ward meeting (held by a ward councillor and his/her committee members) and an IDP consultative meeting (held by the municipal speaker's office for consultation on municipal development projects), hence their lack of attendance.

From these answers, the research also gained the impression that young people are perhaps of the belief that, instead, home-owners (in this case, their parents) are the people who

should attend meetings with municipal representatives, which would explain their general disinterest (to say the least) in attending such meetings.

Community participation is an important ingredient in ensuring that the objectives of IDP are realised and achieved. However, community participation cannot succeed in addressing the socio-economic realities, in line with the objectives and ideals of participatory communication, unless power dynamics and power relations are restructured. Authorities have to ensure that their systems and structures enable bottom-up participation of citizens in key decision-making regarding their development (Leboea, 2003). In line with these sentiments, the participation of the youth, as well as women in crucial deliberations in local development affairs, is also critical and in line with what participatory communication stands for: inclusivity and the empowerment of marginalised groups in key decision-making processes towards development and social change.

On the one hand, the focus group discussions revealed that the community was made aware of earmarked projects only during discussions at IDP meetings. Even at these meetings, however, the community was not involved in decision making or in the implementation phases of the projects, apart from being told that there were development projects in the pipeline aimed at improving their lives. This kind of participation can be characterised as either "passive participation" or "participation by consultation" in Mefalopulos's (2008) typology.

On the other hand, interviews with municipal officials revealed that the municipality played a dominant role based on its involvement throughout the process, and that meetings were held with the communities after which council meetings were held where resolutions regarding earmarked projects were passed. At these council meetings, only municipal councillors are allowed to make input and while the public is allowed to attend, they are demarcated in the "public gallery" and are not allowed to disturb councillors while they deliberate.

The conclusion drawn from observations and focus group discussions regarding "participation" is that the Jouberton municipal IDP meetings seemed mainly to be held to fulfil the legal requirement of participatory democracy, and little no evidence emerged of "empowered" and "active" community participation in decision-making processes. This form of participation can be regarded as "participation-as-a-means", instead of "participation-as-an-end-in-itself" (cf. Dervin & Huesca, 1997; Melote & Steeves, 2015) type of characterisation.

This, according to Linje Manyozo (2016:955), occurs when development managers fail to apply the three forms of listening in Paulo Freire's "self-reflexive" exposition – "listening to evidence"; "listening to ourselves"; and "listening as a form of speaking" – when developing or implementing policies aimed at development and social change.

While it cannot be said that Jouberton's IDP frameworks were undemocratic, findings suggest that little room is given for community members to champion at the forefront of local government IDP project deliberations and decision making. In addition, the problem lies

with the intent of development managers and local authorities which informs their approach and dominant role in municipal "participatory" processes. Local citizens are not given space to "self-reflect" on basic needs and personal capacity in addressing these, and this leads to political co-option of "community views" or prioritisation of certain development projects as deemed necessary by the authorities. This is as a result of the "strategic" nature of participatory processes in local government: municipal authorities are required to use (public) participation as a means to obtain and unlock funding and grants from National treasury (in the form of Municipal Infrastructure grants as well as in accordance with the division of revenue processes). In this way, participatory communication is used as an extension of the modernisation paradigm: a top-down and "strategic" approach towards development with emphasis placed on serving economic interests of municipal authorities, instead of a "bottom-up" form of dialogue, negotiation and empowering processes aimed at inclusiveness and grassroots decision making.

In addition, and as various scholars have reported (Mefalopulos, 2008; Melkote & Steeves, 2015; Tufte, 2017; Manyozo, 2017), depriving the recipients of social change of a platform to take charge in addressing their own development challenges can cause problems. They may remain "docile" because they lack the financial resources and roles to change their status quo and transform for the better. The absence of proper engagement is what Manyozo (2017) regards as a spectacle of development. This reasoning is emphatic of the centrality of "dialogue" in participatory communication, a theme which will now be considered.

4.2 Dialogue

From participant observation, this study confirmed that the municipality uses meetings as a means to facilitate dialogue with communities around IDP projects. However, in practice, the IDP meetings tended to be clouded by other issues outside the IDP agenda such as refuse collection, title deeds enquiries, ward by-elections, and high electricity tariffs and rents. This, as various other studies have revealed (Leboea, 2003; Williams, 2006), is caused by the failure of the municipality to facilitate ongoing feedback to the community. When meetings are called, community members use the platform to complain about pre-existing issues regardless of the intended purpose of the meeting.

The focus group discussions revealed that some community members were unaware of the advantages that empowered participation through the IDP process could bring to their lives. Others indicated that their lack of interest in municipal meetings was based on politics, as one participant emphatically maintained:

> These guys [municipal officials], when they have to discuss issues affecting our ward, they call meetings to discuss issues affecting a particular political party instead ... these meetings are useless to me; these guys do not call imbizos for the whole community anymore. So how can they cover issues affecting the whole community while in practice they only call party affiliates? How will I participate when I'm not affiliated with their political party?

Moreover, a sharp disconnect between the municipality and community members was clear in the interviews with the two municipal officials, who believed that their communication efforts were efficient. The municipal mayor explained at length how they used different media platforms to reach communities regarding IDP deliberations:

> We have different methods we use to communicate with the communities. We use councillors who are supposed to have ward meetings every month. We also use Star FM as an effective communication method and other local radio stations like Motsweding FM and North West FM. We also hold sub-sectional meetings and use different political organisations during their gatherings, while traffic officers use loud-hailers to make announcements.

From the above statement, it is evident that dialogue, from the perspective of municipal authorities, is considered in a strategic and mechanical sense, where various tools are adopted in a top-down fashion in order to "reach out to" communities (through the media and other mass communication tools) and not to actually use dialogue as an empowering tool for local citizens to take charge of decision making regarding IDP processes. Additionally, when commenting on feedback to communities, both interview participants conceded that feedback was minimal and needed improvement. One of the interview respondents, the director for strategic planning, evaluation and control, also suggested that their communication efforts with communities needed to improve, perhaps by involving the media further, in order to prevent IDP meetings from being plagued by unrelated service delivery issues:

> I would say we are exploring all, I think, but radio makes it easier, I think because as you listen to engagements, people are able to, without being identified, voice out their complaints or even say "I'm anonymous and this is my problem ...". So I think radio is the best.

This concession, however, places reliance on mass media (i.e. radio) as a strategic tool desired by municipal authorities for interfacing with local citizens. This reliance on mass media also characterises participatory communication as an extension of the modernisation paradigm, which emphasises a media-centric approach to communication and social change, where active and genuine participation is limited and non-existent to some extent. Furthermore, the concession by municipal authorities supports a view from some focus group interview respondents, who perceive their voice as being secondary to that of the officials who are in charge of communication processes in IDP meetings. This kind of disconnect and lack of feedback between community members and municipal authorities shows that the latter stakeholder group perceive themselves as "communication initiators" while community members play the role of "communication receivers" during IDP planning. From this observation, it seems there is a concern around a power relationship between municipal officials and the community during IDP meetings. Empowerment, therefore, is an essential theme linked to dialogue and participation.

4.3 Empowerment

The study found that the community did not take ownership of municipal IDP meetings and projects. During focus group discussions, some respondents explained that they did not see themselves playing any role in the IDP-related communication process initiated by the municipality. It also emerged strongly from observation of IDP meetings that a municipal representative took the lead in the whole process and while it was clear that the official spoke on behalf of the municipality, the community lacked their own official, unified voice or representative. Furthermore, one focus group respondent was quick to opine that he did not trust municipal representatives because "they come to present IDP projects to us and want us to agree with them, the next thing you hear that a friend to the mayor has received a tender for installing electricity in our community".

It was also observable in this study that, since some focus group interview respondents did not participate in the municipal IDP processes for political and personal reasons, there was insufficient evidence to support their assertion that not all community members gain or benefit from IDP meetings.

However, during their interviews, both the mayor and the Director for Strategic Planning, Monitoring and Control made it clear that they regarded their role in IDP meetings as central because they had a legislative mandate to share relevant information regarding earmarked projects with the community. The mayor further explained that the municipality's role in IDP meetings is dominant because municipal officials have to structure IDP consultations in a way that allows the community to be aware of upcoming projects and that this, in turn, creates "transparency, knowledge-sharing and empowerment". This assertion suggested that "participation" of communities in IDP consultations was limited to being informed about the municipal agenda, and the interviews gave no further evidence of the "empowered participation" outlined by Mefalopulos (2008). It also emerged that the municipal representatives viewed their acts of information-sharing with their constituencies about past or earmarked IDP projects as "empowering".

They indicated, however, that because of the difficulties encountered during IDP meetings, such as poor attendance, they needed to raise civic awareness of the importance of being present at IDP consultative meetings. This, they said, was crucial because the Municipal Systems Act (No. 32 of 2000) requires a municipal authority to provide a mass democratic and accountable platform for discussions with local communities as a means of promoting social and local economic development.

The findings from interviews and focus group interview discussions suggest a disconnect between the municipal authority and communities: on the one hand, the municipal leaders thought that their approach in directing and taking charge of IDP-related public engagements was in the best interest of the community, while on the other hand, community members felt disempowered and even more marginalised.

The belief by municipal officials, noted during the interview stage, that they were responsible for "creating" a platform for the public to participate in IDP deliberations was in itself disempowering, because they assumed their "donor" role meant that it was sufficient for community participation to be limited to passive involvement in one or two meetings about projects that the municipality had already earmarked. This perspective is highlighted in a comprehensive critique by Williams (2006), who postulates that modern participation in South Africa's local government is characterised by political co-option masquerading as democratic joint decision-making and equal knowledge-sharing of ideas regarding basic community needs. However, it goes without saying that active participation requires the power imbalances between municipal authorities and citizens to be revised and some decision-making power should be assigned to the latter stakeholder groups (Everatt, Marais & Dube, 2010:225).

The present study identified a "planner-centred" approach to development in the municipality's IDP processes rather than a "people-centred" focus. This is where participation is viewed "a means to meet locally felt needs and redistribute scarce resources, but also has inherent value as a process which empowers the poor by enhancing local management capacity, increasing confidence in indigenous potential, and raising collective consciousness" (Michener, 1998:2106). In line with Mefalopulos's (2008) typology of participation, the local citizens in the Jouberton study experienced this kind of top-down, planner-centred approach and were "passive participators" of development as recipients of information about earmarked projects; no evidence emerged of genuine ongoing community empowerment.

Furthermore, their "participation" was limited to public meetings, while final ratification and decision-making regarding IDP projects took place at municipal council meetings, in which councillors voted and decided which projects to undertake while the public was allowed only to watch the proceedings from designated public galleries.

5. LIMITATION

The qualitative nature of the study used a single municipality as a case study, but its findings perhaps pave the way for a quantitative inquiry on a broader/national scale and one that can make more generalised findings.

6. CONCLUSION

This study explored participatory communication in the context of how municipal authorities and community members perceive their participation in a municipality's IDP consultations. Findings include inadequate feedback facilitation mechanisms; lack of active and meaningful public participation during IDP consultations where community members were mere "passive" participators during the communication process; and there was no evidence of community empowerment or engagement in the decision-making processes and project implementation.

The study has also shown that participation, dialogue and empowerment are part and parcel of participatory communication and cannot be viewed in isolation, or detached from, the said paradigm of development communication. It found that participation, development and empowerment are used as buzzwords for development and social change, but the actions and practice of stakeholders in IDP processes are non-participatory and disempowering in nature. This is reflected in how discussions, dialogue and engagement between municipal officials and community members are carried out: through a top-down communication approach. In addition, municipal IDP processes are conducted only to fulfil a legislative imperative of public participation, and little evidence was found of "bottom-up", dialogic and communicative process aimed at empowering local citizens. On a theoretical level, the study reveals how concepts such as participation, dialogue and empowerment are not linked to participatory communication discourse but are understood as independent buzzwords used from the perspective of public administration.

This is evident from the availability of a large body of knowledge under public administration on these concepts (i.e. public participation, participatory democracy, and citizen participation); while only a handful of research studies are pointed out that draw a strong link between these concepts and participatory communication in municipal IDP frameworks in the South African context. Notwithstanding, it can also be argued that participation (in the form of participatory communication) is in itself utopian and normative (Huesca, 2001; Williams, 2004:563; Otto & Fourie, 2016); therefore the study proposes further critical research aimed as theoretically entrenching this concept as part of the broader communication for social change theory.

Furthermore, and from a theoretical perspective, the study recommends further research to be conducted on the effect of culture as well as an exploration of participatory communication through the lens of communicative action as well as dialogical praxis theories, perhaps, as a way of dealing with the current theoretical challenges. Youth and women participation in municipal IDP, as well as local economic development (LED) planning processes, are also themes needing further research exploration.

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