



Applying participatory communication principles in Covid-19 health message dissemination in a rural South African municipality

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Abstract

During global pandemics such as COVID-19, authorities around the globe have the responsibility of disseminating preventive health messages as widely as possible to contain the crisis. However, often times, as shown by earlier studies (see Molale, 2019; Williams, 2006), governments tend to apply top-down communication approaches and leave local citizens as passive receivers of messages they are required to put into practice. This qualitative inquiry examined how officials of Ratlou Municipality in North-West Province, South Africa, communicated COVID-19 messages to communities in the rural villages of Setlagole and Madibogo. Semi-structured interviews with 4 municipal officials and focus group interviews with 28 citizens were conducted. The findings suggest that active citizen participation is needed in the communication value chain so that citizens can have a meaningful role in addressing the pandemic. The study is significant in that it shows how linear communication methods often employed by municipalities to interact with community members are futile, especially when citizens need to be persuaded to adopt new behaviour such as during health emergencies like cholera, Ebola or COVID-19. Moreover, it adds to the growing corpus of research dedicated to advancing participatory communication as an anchor of citizen participation in South Africa's local government and beyond.

Keywords

Communication for Development and Social Change (CFDSC); COVID-19; dialogue; empowerment; participatory health communication; public participation

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Many communication-related lessons can be drawn from COVID-19, especially when looking at how governments around the world handled social relations in the wake of the pandemic. The aim of this article is to explore how key principles of participatory communication, namely participation, dialogue, and empowerment could be applied in a public participatory process involving municipal employees and rural villagers in two villages in the North-West Province, South Africa, within the context of health communication. From a development communication perspective, efforts by officials that largely leave ordinary citizens as passive participants in the creation and dissemination of information often result in a lack of the desired meaningful and sustainable change given the citizens' lack of endorsement (cf. Maina et al. 2020; Melkote & Steeves, 2015; Molale, 2024; Tufté, 2017; Suzina et al., 2020).

Development communication, as a field, can be traced back to the late 1940s, and at its core is a rich research history that spans several decades, which is well documented, and can be categorised according

to three main paradigmatic perspectives as far as development and social change are concerned. These paradigms are modernisation, the dependency paradigm, and the participatory approach to development and social change. Nora Cruz Quebral from the Los Baños College of Agriculture in the Philippines coined the term “development communication” in the early 1970s. In addition, Manyozo (2006) has catalogued the history of development communication into six schools of thought, thereby making it easy for us to map the rich history of this field within a global scheme.

These schools are the Bretton Woods School, Latin American School, Los Baños School, Indian School, African School, and Post-Freire School, which focus on the participatory approach to development. It is arguable, however, that only three schools of thought have been dominant over the years and have shaped much of the debates around development and social change across the globe. These schools can each be linked to the three main paradigms, which are summarised in Table 1.1. below:

Table 1. A summary of schools of thought, related paradigms, and leading researchers in development communication as it evolved over the years

School of Thought	Related Paradigm	Proponents/Leading Researchers of the Schools
The Bretton Woods School	The Modernisation Paradigm	Daniel Lerner, Wilbur Schramm, Shannon and Weaver, and Everett Rogers, among others
The Latin American School	Dependency Paradigm	Arturo Escobar, Luis Ramiro Beltrán, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and Alejandro Barranquero, among others.
The Post-Freire School	Participatory Approach to Development and Social Change	Linje Manyozo, Robert Huesca, Pradip Ninan Thomas, Gumicio Alfonzo Dargon, Karin Wilkins, Silvio Waisbord, Thomas Tufte, Nico Carpentier, and Thomas Tufte, among others

Historically, much of the research within the field of development communication has largely come from the West, hence the modernisation paradigm was regarded as the “dominant paradigm” (Melkote & Steeves, 2015). However, this dominance was challenged by contributions from Latin America in the mid-1960s to the early 1970s when the dependency paradigm emerged, largely due to the growth of critical scholarship influenced by, among other factors, the integration of Paulo Freire’s work around liberation pedagogy, conscientisation, and dialogical praxis into development communication studies (Huesca, 2008; Molale, 2021). From the 1970s, scholarly contributions, mostly from the global south, began to emerge within the participatory communication paradigm, which was also largely influenced by Paulo Freire’s prescriptive interpretation of dialogue as well as critical thinking (conscientisation) and participation (Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006; Huesca, 2008; Manyozo, 2008).

Scholarly work within the participatory approach to development communication is concerned with a fundamental problem inherent in development thinking when facilitating active and bottom-up citizen engagement around the dual complexity of empowerment. This is where on the one hand, empowerment is the resultant product of zero-sum, and on the other hand, the perceived lack by officials to apply a pedagogy of listening as transformational praxis when it comes to affording local citizens the power to actively participate in activities, whose success requires their active involvement (Li, 2017; Manyozo,

2017; Molale, 2024). This problem becomes central in the context of health communication, where the role of local citizens as receivers of health communication campaigns is deemed crucial to the success of the campaign. Additionally, in rural areas such as in South Africa's Ratlou Local Municipality, the use of indigenous languages is an important ingredient, and most preferred mechanism, when it comes to facilitating active citizen involvement in the dissemination of these messages (Molale & Mpofu, 2021).

Ratlou Local Municipality is domiciled in the Ngaka Modiri Molema District of the North West Province in South Africa. It covers vast tracts of rural land that is home to a predominantly Setswana population. The municipal area was chosen because of its rurality and that it is home to a predominantly illiterate population. Out of about 100,000 people, only about 16.1% of the population has completed matric or has some form of higher education (Media Monitoring Africa, 2016). Only 15.2% of the population is employed while only 2% of the population has access to flushing ablution facilities (most of the population uses pit latrines), while about 10.5% of the community has no access to any toilets (*ibid.* 2016). The community has access to two local community radio stations, namely Ratlou FM and Modiri FM. There is a community newspaper called "*Mmega Dikgang*" (loosely translated to mean the news reporter); however, the newspaper is written in English, which is not preferred by the predominantly illiterate community, which is conversant with the native Setswana language (Molale & Mpofu, 2021).

This study is divided into six sections. Following the introduction is a section that critically interrogates the literature on health communication from a communication for development and social change perspective. It further deals with challenges related to facilitating the active involvement and participation of local communities in health communication campaigns about COVID-19 in a rural municipality in the North-West Province of South Africa. In section three, we provide a theoretical framework that fleshes out the central meaning ascribed to concepts such as participation, empowerment, and dialogue from a participatory communication perspective as a way of aiding the data analysis section on how to explore the perceptions of role players in this study. In section four, we provide the methodological framework underpinning this study, which is a qualitative research approach that is rooted in an interpretive paradigm of inquiry. The section further explicates how the data were gathered and analysed. The fifth section outlines our presentation, interpretation and analysis of the findings of the study. In the last section, we conclude the study's main contribution and offer some recommendations.

COMMUNICATION IN HEALTH CAMPAIGNS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Alongside a considerably large corpus of scholarly interest devoted to tracing interdisciplinary pathways between health and communication studies, there has emerged a particular interest in theorising participatory communication in health studies (cf. Basu & Dutta, 2008; Greiner, 2012; . Lagerwerf et al., 2009; Obregon & Mosquera, 2005) in different contexts around the globe.

In most cases, research focuses on how agency, participation and collective action could be employed in alleviating, for instance, alarming HIV/AIDS infection rates among sex workers; or how mediated communication through the use of different media platforms such as apps and games could be used to facilitate and collect user experiences, which is instrumental in an effective patient-centred care approach by nurses within a primary health care system. In other areas, studies have been conducted on how the use of entertainment education (e.g., television and radio) and participation in health campaigns can help influence social and behavioural change (cf. Basu & Dutta, 2008; McPhail, 2009; Tufte, 2001) or how youth participation in health-focused social action projects could lead to the improvement in adolescent health and related outcomes (Suleiman et al., 2006).

In public health, studies tend to focus on how communication and media could be used to foster citizen and behaviour change in health campaigns (Silk et al., 2022) or on how health practitioners, social scientists, health educators; media and communication experts; health experts and policy directors; and operational research directors could all be instrumental, if they work interdependently, to help address a health crisis faced by society (Neuberger & Miller, 2022).

One of the notable arguments advanced in health communication scholarly work is that communication is one of the key methods of overcoming the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In

addition, effective communication allows the information receivers to understand and apply the senders' health messages to improve their health conditions. For instance, Seytre (2020) posits that adherence to COVID-19 prevention recommendations is crucial to epidemic control. His study in 15 West African nations on communication messages on COVID-19 revealed unfounded messages, as well as a lack of communication on critical information to understand the prevention measures being promoted. However, the kind of effective communication advanced in this argument is linear, top-down, and unidirectional. This means that the receivers are not actively involved in the communication process and their role is just to receive the messages provided by the main actors (i.e., senders). In contrast, Hyland-Wood et al. (2021) argued that an effective communication strategy is a two-way process that involves clear messages, delivered via proper platforms, tailored for diverse audiences, and shared by trusted people.

Abu-Akel et al. (2021), based on the impact of spokesperson selection on message propagation during times of crisis, examined the effectiveness of different public figures in promoting social distancing among 12,194 respondents from 6 countries that were severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Their results show that immunology expert Dr. Anthony Fauci achieved the highest level of respondent willingness to reshare a call for social distancing. This is followed by a government spokesperson while celebrity spokespersons were least effective. They suggest that the likelihood of message resharing increased with age and when respondents expressed positive sentiments towards the spokesperson. Therefore, it is evident that scientific experts and governments should not underestimate their power to inform and persuade in times of crisis and underscores the crucial importance of selecting the most effective messenger in to deliver lifesaving information during a pandemic.

A lack of acknowledging language significance in communicating COVID-19 pandemic messages results in public distrust of government efforts at combating the disease, as observed by Miller and Castrucci (2021). They explain the US government's highly politicised approach and how the growing ideological tensions continued to affect COVID-19 message dissemination. They believe that language has a profound influence on health behaviours and is a key component of science communication. Language gives meaning to messages that are conveyed and, when used effectively, has the potential to elicit behaviour change.

Premised on the fact that health messages are indispensable in public health, and are the connection between health experts, researchers and communities, Woke (2020) assessed the current health messages used to curb COVID-19 transmission in South Africa. He discovered a gap in the health messaging techniques adopted by South Africa's Department of Health Messages passed to the public were prescriptive on how to prevent COVID-19. Therefore, he believed the messages lacked innovativeness, creativity, and strategy. Moreover, community engagement was not satisfactory. He explained that South Africa's Department of Health rarely communicated supporting evidence from studies on the benefits of COVID-19 preventive measures and support for behaviour change.

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, effective health communication can benefit from well thought out strategies, the use of public figures and effective language, correct health messages, innovativeness, creativity and smart use of social media networking sites that can enhance public trust in government's efforts at tackling health-related issues. From the above review of the literature, we argue that it has been difficult to locate a single study that attempt to conceptualise key concepts in participatory communication, namely participation, dialogue, and empowerment, using a public health communication case study to try to explore the extent of citizen participation and empowerment.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The Participatory Approach to Development Communication

Participatory communication is a citizen-centric paradigm of development communication that emanated in the late 1960s and 1970s (Melkote & Steeves, 2015), whose objective is rooted in allowing for the active participation and involvement of local citizens in development and social change programmes designed to improve the quality of their lives and their environment. The paradigm emerged as an intellectual

breakaway in the appreciation of development from a top-down, instrumental action approach called modernisation, to a bottom-up, citizen-centric approach that is hinged on collective action, collaboration and co-creation. The former paradigm placed control over decision-making about development programmes for poor citizens in developing nations squarely in the hands of international development aid managers, donors, bureaucrats, and external people due to their power and dominance of the process. Participatory communication, on the other hand, advocates for the beneficiaries of this development aid by seeking to guarantee their active involvement in decision-making so that genuine and meaningful development and social change can take place (Bessette, 2021).

Since the 1970s, different scholars have used different theoretical approaches to try to conceive ways in which the participatory communication paradigm could be imagined in practical settings. However, the work by Brazilian education philosopher and activist Paulo Freire and accounts from Latin American scholars such as Louis Ramiro Beltrán, Antonio Pasquali, and Juan Díaz Bordenave, among others (Sáez, 2013) can all be credited with how participatory communication became a viable paradigm to shine the spotlight on ordinary citizens who otherwise would be treated as mere passive objects without anything to contribute when development and social change are decided. One of the reasons for this is that inherent in participatory communication, are key concepts that can be used to anchor the role of ordinary citizens in development programmes. These concepts include participation, dialogue, and empowerment, among others (Mefalopulos, 2008). These concepts are also employed in the current study as a way of trying to ascertain if the communication between municipal officials involves bottom-up approaches that emphasise citizen agency.

With participation, a key takeaway is exploring how to enhance the involvement of development aid beneficiaries in all stages of the programmes to allow for the use of indigenous knowledge to become one of the defining features of those development programmes (Incio et al., 2021). In contrast, the present study approaches participation from the vantage point of local citizens from the bottom-up, focusing on their agency, their use of language as well as indigenous culture and knowledge without the influence of others (from the top down) (Huesca, 2008; Molale, 2024).

With dialogue, the participatory communication approach aligns with an instructive and prescriptive interpretation looking at how communication and interactions among development managers and ordinary citizens are facilitated (Molale, 2024). This prescriptive interpretation is rooted mainly in Paulo Freire's notion of dialogue as "genuine discourse" (c.f. Jenlink & Banathy, 2005) that is rooted in praxis (i.e., transformation) (Freire, 1970). In this way, dialogue can be viewed as an intersubjective process of interaction and engagement, where role players listen to one another and value each other's contributions, which at times may lead to conflict but are prepared to discuss opposing views until compromises and/or consensus and/or decisions are jointly made.

With empowerment, it is worth noting that its prescriptive interpretation is rooted in a rights-based approach where local citizens have equal latitude with development managers and authorities, especially over the decision-making stages of a development and social change endeavour. This is predicated by the fact that inherent power imbalances that are typically present when examining the typical relationship between development managers and local citizens need to be addressed and the latter stakeholder group deserves to have an active voice and involvement when decisions about development endeavours are made (Mefalopulos, 2008; Melkote & Steeves, 2015). In line with these arguments, Molale's PhD thesis describes empowerment as the "short- and long-term positive impact of development projects on the lives of local citizens as a result of their involvement in the decision-making process, and their contribution to local development activities as well as the extent to which they get opportunities to grow, learn and develop themselves in the process" (Molale, 2021:107).

Since power can be regarded as a relational concept, some scholars believe that such a move would render power to be interpreted as a "zero-sum game": a situation in which one stakeholder group gains power in a development process at the expense of another stakeholder group (Li, 2017). However, Molale and Fourie (2023), when faced with the same argument in their study that advocates for local citizens to be empowered to make decisions in a participatory process in a local municipality, advance an argument

that empowerment should be "conceived as the broadening of the power base, instead of merely a transfer of power and authority over to citizens". Here, the authors imply that instead of a zero-sum game, power should be interpreted as a "positive-sum game" in which the sharing of power among all role players and the apportioning of some degree of autonomy to local citizens is not seen as encroachment. This interpretation of power is also adopted in the present study, where citizen empowerment is not understood as a process that seeks to take power from current custodians of citizen participation processes but as a process through which there can be collaboration and co-creation of meaning in the development of health communication messages (whether they are about COVID-19 or any health emergency experienced across municipalities).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was employed in line with the present study's interpretive/constructionist research paradigm. The purpose of a qualitative methodology is to "explore, describe, or explain social phenomenon; unpack the meanings people ascribe to activities, situations, events, or artefacts..." (Leavy, 2014:2). With this in mind, the qualitative research approach allowed the researchers to gain insights and multiple constructions of reality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This is rooted in the fundamental belief that "both reality and knowledge are constructed and reproduced through communication, interaction, and practice" (Tracy, 2013:40). Out of a population of about 100 000 people in about 30 000 households (Media Monitoring Africa, 2024), a purposive sampling technique was used to identify 30 respondents for this study. These were composed of 26 focus group respondents and 4 key informant interviewees who were mainly working as municipal officials. This sample was composed of key informants who are community leaders, ward councillors, and municipal officials. After receiving permission and consent from the municipality to collect the data, the 26 focus group interviewees were divided into 3 groups of community members. Group 1 comprised women from Setlagole village, group 2 comprised 8 people (6 women and 2 men) from both Setlagole and Madibogo Villages, and group 3 was composed of 12 men from Madibogo Village. Key informant interviewees were the manager in the office of the municipal manager; the municipal council speaker; a municipal ward councillor; and the municipality's communication manager. Pseudonyms were used to hide the identities of the research participants. Municipal representatives were referred to as "Official 1" or "Official 2", etc., while focus group respondents were referenced as "Participant FG1A" (this implies Participant A in Focus Group 1), or Participant FG2D (meaning Participant D in Focus Group 2).

All respondents were asked questions that revolved around media platform type, selection process, languages and frequency of COVID-19 messages, and the challenges encountered when disseminating COVID-19 messages in the municipality. The purpose behind these questions was to explore the extent to which participation, dialogue, and empowerment were featured in all communication efforts employed by municipal officials and to record perceptions of citizens. This was to ascertain the extent to which they felt involved in COVID-19 health message development and distribution across different villages in the municipality in line with the ethos of participatory communication.

Participant consent was obtained for researchers to use their personal Android phones and laptops to record the interviews, which was instrumental in the data analysis process. Notes were also taken as the interviews progressed to supplement the recordings. From a deductive logical standpoint, the three concepts in participatory communication, namely participation, dialogue and empowerment, were adopted from theory and used as key themes in the study's thematic data analysis process. This is provided in the section below, where our findings are discussed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study's findings revolve around how Ratlou Municipality officials communicated COVID-19 health messages to community members during the government-imposed lockdown and restrictions on human movements. Then focus was on media tools, factors determining media tools' use, factors determining message frequency, language of message dissemination, media effectiveness, and challenges of health

message dissemination. In addition, we also concentrated on how participation, dialogue and citizen empowerment were facilitated and/or achieved in the communication process between municipal officials and residents in the rural communities of Setlagole and Madibogo Villages.

Ratlou Municipal Local Authority constitutes two wings: political and administrative. Headed by a speaker of the council, the political wing communicates directly with community members. It consists of ward councillors and a ward committee that relays feedback to community members. The administrative wing, headed by the municipal manager, assists in designing communication and providing platforms for use by political wing officials. It was found that municipal officials play a "custodian" role and are in charge of all public communication processes within the municipality.

Citizen Participation

Citizen participation looks at the extent to which the voice of the local community is accommodated, facilitated, and finds expression about development and social change processes. Ideally, studies that set out to examine the extent and nature of citizen participation would typically ask questions such as how the community participates in local development planning, what its role is, where its participation is limited, and so on.

However, for the present study, a different approach was employed. We intended to learn how Ratlou municipal officials as well as community members view their interactions and communication around COVID-19 health campaigns. Furthermore, we wanted to explore the perceptions of municipal officials and community leaders on how communication was facilitated within this context. This exploration was concerned with identifying opportunities for civic agency and active citizen participation in the communication processes followed, and if there were created spaces for communication and participation in COVID-19 message design, dissemination, and consumption. This, we believe, was crucial in helping to arrive at conclusions around the extent of citizen participation as far as communication around the COVID-19 health pandemic is concerned. We discovered that the municipality used different platforms to communicate with citizens, but this communication was linear and unidirectional with very limited opportunities for the facilitation of feedback. Notwithstanding, municipal officials maintained that their communication activities allowed them to reach as many people as possible across the different villages within the municipality. This is demonstrated in the following extract from one of the key informant interviews:

We used the radio stations because at that time gatherings were prohibited. We used radio stations and requested people to send their comments via WhatsApp and through the lines we opened at the time. (Official 2).

Furthermore, when describing their communication with communities, another interviewee explained the process and communication protocols followed to ensure that COVID-19-related health messages reached the community. He stated that the chain of command started when they had to form a Municipal COVID-19 Command Council that was housed in the office of the municipal speaker and all their communication and plans around COVID-19 were initiated in this council. Ward councillors and ward committee members were then used as the municipality's mouthpieces to take messages into the community.

Two observations were made from one of the official's responses. First, all COVID-19 health messages were centralised in this municipal command council and cascaded down to other municipal structures, which then reached communities in the different villages around the municipality. Second, even when spaces were created for community members to make comments around their messages, it was not clarified if they did indeed receive those comments in the limited communication spaces provided due to COVID-19 restrictions, and what was done with the comments.

Notwithstanding, when asked how language affects the nature of their communication, in these limited spaces with the community; the respondent highlighted that the indigenous language spoken in

the community, namely Setswana, is critical to all their communication efforts. This point was highlighted by a municipal official during one of the key informant interviews and is demonstrated in the following extract:

Remember that I said the communication from the institution/municipality is done through political office. If that happens, they have to go to the radio stations. It will be done in Setswana because that is the predominant language that people understand, and if there are questions raised by other members, who may not speak Setswana, that is also being catered for... (Official 4).

Another official referred to two media releases and a public notice from 2020 as examples of how they communicated their messages about COVID-19 to the community. He emphasised that they proactively updated the community about plans that were put in place to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and always reminded the community to observe lockdown measures.

According to focus group respondents, they receive COVID-19-related messages once a month or even once every three months from the municipality. This, they said was comparatively lower than the weekly communication they have with their local traditional authority. They indicated that their weekly meetings at their traditional council are for talking about all issues affecting the community, including COVID-19. And yet, the traditional council is not a government structure and it does not have a COVID-19 Command Council but it is still more efficient in terms of accessing community members than the municipality with all its resources and authority. One respondent even suggested that there is a need for more people to be employed at the municipality to improve the communication process and to further reach community members based on their sociographic and demographic information.

I think they should hire more people to help our community, including the elderly, to be more responsive to COVID-19. They should target our schools, our community in clinics and across the municipality... Mass employment is key to helping our community protect against this pandemic (FG2B).

From the above views, there are interesting conclusions that can be made based on how participation is understood or perceived by the research subjects. Drawing from the literature, scholars such as Eversole (2003) and Cornwall (2007) have established that participation, as a concept that is predominantly used in development discourse (alongside concepts such as democracy, citizenship, and dialogue), risks being labelled a “buzzword” - a word that is used in development discourse to unlock development aid funds if thrown around - even if there is no evidence of genuine local participation in development and change programmes. Likewise, various studies have found that it is common practice for the concept to be used in the local government sphere in South Africa as a buzzword (Hofisi, 2014; Molale, 2024; Tau, 2013; Williams, 2006), where officials tend to use the word merely as a means to achieve desired ends.

From the above interactions with key informant interviewees, it became apparent that although they say there is citizen participation in their affairs, they admit that due to COVID-19 restrictions, there were limited spaces created for public participation in their health message design and distribution. Officials relied on unidirectional message transmission from the municipal chambers via a channel (i.e., public notice, press release sent to the media, etc.) to community members.

Just as it has been found in other studies, it can be argued that Ratlou municipal officials use participation as a buzzword and a means to try and achieve desired ends. Notwithstanding, in their presentation of a model that is aimed at “rethinking” the public participation process in local government, Molale and Fourie (2023) suggest that perhaps participation should be redefined so that a clear mandate can be derived from a correct and realistic interpretation of the concept. They define participation as follows:

A social process that is, at times ongoing and in other instances, planned; characterised by the establishment of platforms (i.e., invited space) where all role players engage in all-inclusive dialogue, and whose aim is to reach agreed upon decisions concerning solutions to common development problems (Molale & Fourie, 2023:4).

Here, the authors offer a theory-based and context-specific definition of participation, which describes the roles that municipal officials and community members should play in the public participation process. Most notably, the definition is rooted in the participatory communication paradigm of development communication. The following key implications are evident from this definition:

- . Participation ought to be an ongoing process, but it can sometimes be planned.
- . Participation should be rooted in dialogue.
- . Participation leads to collective action and shared decision-making.

Dialogue

Similar to participation, dialogue also focuses on the extent to which citizens' voices are facilitated in communication processes that involve citizens and authorities. Ideally, dialogue is approached from a prescriptive sense instead of referring to mere everyday conversations or discussions. Within the context of participatory communication dialogue is prescriptive because it can only be seen as meaningful if interlocutors have careful regard for each other's contributions and are engaged in meaningful discourse that should ultimately lead to praxis (Freire, 1970; Jenlink & Banathy, 2005). Approaching dialogue from this perspective means when we conceive it in the context of communication between municipal officials and citizens, we need to probe how the role players communicate, how feedback is facilitated, and if the kind of communication taking place signifies opportunities where there is joint and equal contribution of ideas in meetings or any form of communication towards the attainment of praxis.

According to officials of Ratlou Municipality, they deployed loud-hailing techniques, local radio stations, social media networking sites, meetings, pamphlets, flyers, funerals and other events as communication tools for disseminating COVID-19 health messages to the public. Out of these media tools, findings show that loud-hailing techniques, local radio stations, social media networking sites and funeral events were predominantly used as avenues to reach out to community members about COVID-19 health messages.

The loud-hailing technique involves assigning someone who understands and is familiar with the community and the environment to disseminate information. He summons and gathers the available people, and delivers messages by word of mouth. It is similar to face-to-face communication from a source representing the machinery of the municipality to a group of assembled community people.

Focus group respondents confirmed most of the communication platforms that municipal officials indicated that they use, notably, the posters, a local community radio station, WhatsApp groups, such as the Ratlou Women's Desk, and announcements during funerals.

Regarding the use of WhatsApp, the focus group respondents highlighted that the social media platform is used to cascade messages to the community, in a one-sided and top-down manner, instead of holding two-way conversations and interactions that lead to collective action, agreements, and good mass practices around curbing the spread of COVID-19 in rural villages. This argument implies that the kind of interactions between municipal officials and the community in these WhatsApp groups is not dialogical in nature. Dialogue, when conceived from a participatory communication perspective, is linked to Paulo Freire's (1970) notion of praxis; that is, it is an action-reaction process where interlocutors use the word to transform the world. The presupposition here is that if municipal officials continue with the way they interact with communities on these platforms, there is little likelihood that genuine development, transformation, and change will take place. This line of thought is further evidenced in the following interview extract from a focus interviewee who expressed dissatisfaction with how the municipality interacts with community members:

FG1A: "For instance, I would be using WhatsApp but not having data on my phone, this means I will maybe receive their messages long after they had sent them or shared them in the group."

In agreeing with the above respondent, other focus group members indicated that they do not trust the communication coming from the municipality because they believe municipal officials do not follow all COVID-19 protocols at all times.

FDG 1 (D): "These people are afraid to close their offices, it's like they are worried about time and how delayed their programmes might be, but COVID-19 does not care about that.... Sometimes you would hear that the municipality is closed on a Wednesday because of a case, but come Thursday, the offices are open and they are operating again... They get COVID-19 cases every week and their communication is poor".

Another media tool used by municipal officials is local radio stations. Ratlou FM and Modiri FM were used to reach community members. The use of radio stations has an advantage over loud-hailing techniques due to audience reach. Although using local radio stations is effective, an official complained that radio use "is not effective in all the wards of the municipalities because when you go to some northern parts of the municipalities radio signals have not reached there. It's only one-sided. It reaches certain portions". Similarly, the speaker of the council explains the merits and demerits of using radio:

The radio is also good. We use the radio to convey the budget messages to the communities, and also people even phone into the radio, asking questions and all that. They participated actually during a budget presentation by the mayor. That shows that our people can listen to the radio. The disadvantage is that it is not all of them that listen to the radios or participate in radio compared to loudhailing. (Official 2)

Despite its drawbacks, radio use encourages community participation in local government affairs. Funerals also serve as conduits of health information to people because it is easy for municipal officials to appeal to people's senses during such solemn occasions. Lastly, findings also showed that Ratlou municipal officials used social media networking sites and apps to sensitise community members about COVID-19 issues. WhatsApp appears to be an effective tool for information dissemination combined with radio.

One official explained that municipal officials are put in charge of different WhatsApp groups through which they interact with community members. Also, they use WhatsApp groups to hold council meetings among the officials and ward meetings with community members. However, focus group interviewees disagreed with this submission, indicating that municipal officials only use WhatsApp groups to share messages and not to hold virtual meetings.

Empowerment

As an important feature of citizen participation, empowerment focuses on how local citizens should be made to feel their views matter and that they can make meaningful contributions towards their development and the development of their surroundings. This is arguably the main idea that sums up the central argument behind the paradigm shift that took place in the development communication field, from modernisation to participatory communication (Wilkins 2009; Servaes, 2008).

Within the context of this study, we aimed to trace instances where either officials and/or community members referenced the extent to which residents were given the space and authority to decide on communication measures and efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19. We wanted to check if COVID-19 message development was informed by citizen involvement to help us in concluding that the citizens were empowered to decide on how to jointly find ways to curb the spread of COVID-19 and not merely be

passive receivers of information. Empowerment implies providing space and facilitation of the voices of ordinary citizens who are often disenfranchised and marginalised during development and social change.

Notwithstanding, the legislations that govern local government in South Africa do require that citizen participation processes be followed (South Africa, 1996; South Africa, 2000), thereby implying some degree of citizen empowerment and agency in these processes. However, they lack a failsafe mechanism to assess and guarantee that citizens are indeed empowered in a true participatory communication sense. It is from the above premise that power and, more specifically empowerment, should be redefined so that it becomes clear how citizens should be empowered if they are to feel valued and when making contributions towards defining the local development and social change agenda.

The challenges with having to mount an effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, with the effects of the pandemic continuing to manifest even in 2022, hampered the free flow of health communication and its impact on the people that were supposed to use health messages to better their lives. Key informant interviewees indicated that communicating health information to counter the spread of COVID-19 in the municipality was affected by comorbidity of service delivery, people's low education level, PPE problems, media blackout, political ideology effects, and COVID-19 restrictions, regulations, and lockdowns.

In their view, service delivery that was significant in reducing the virulent effects of the COVID-19 pandemic suffered a great deal. This situation pertains to those workers during the pandemic who normally performed duties to curtail the spread of the disease. An official painted the picture thus:

This is an unprecedented condition. We tried by all means to do what we had to do under normal circumstances. But it is not easy. We live in fear. We live in despair, and service delivery is also tremendously affected. (Official 2)

Comorbidity negatively impacts the fight against the pandemic in the municipality. Notwithstanding, the officials interviewed stating that they ensured that service delivery reached community members with minimal disruptions. This statement could not be verified since the speaker further admitted that COVID-19 restrictions affected public participation: *'I always mention the issue of this COVID-19 restriction because it affected us. I can't say we didn't have any challenge as regards public participation because the restriction itself, or the regulation itself restricted us to do more things that we could have done'* (Official 3).

Particularly, he noted the restrictions prevented them from employing traditional media platforms like the use of local music artists, poets or griots to disseminate important health instructions as these methods would attract large crowds, an aspect that was forbidden under COVID-19 regulations. Community members' low level of education is also indicated to have affected how officials assessed COVID-19 health messages.

This challenge is believed to have been affected by the nonchalant attitude some community members displayed in observing mask wearing and social distancing publicly, especially in church and at funeral gatherings. The officials felt that people violated social distancing rules during funeral events as well as on days when they received their pensions, and these situations constituted a grave challenge for fear of super-spreading the virus. An official attributed this attitudinal behaviour towards disseminated messages to human nature.

If the insights obtained from municipal officials are anything to go by, the communication-related challenges experienced by the municipality at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic prevented it from exploring ways in which communication processes can be broadened, thus implying that it could not partner with the community or give them latitude through sharing the responsibility for developing COVID-19 messages. As custodians of municipal affairs, the municipal officials might have felt uncomfortable entrusting responsibility to citizens as this would lead to a "zero-sum-game" being experienced. As argued in the theoretical framework section of this paper, this should not be the case since empowering citizens does not necessarily need to lead to officials losing their power or authority over the process.

CONCLUSION

This article sought to explore how key principles of participatory communication, namely participation, dialogue, and empowerment could be applied in a public participatory process involving municipal employees and rural villagers in two South African villages in the North West Province within the context of health communication. We studied the nature of participation and communication between Ratlou municipal employees and villagers by exploring how they shared, exchanged, or disseminated COVID-19 messages during the pandemic's peak in 2021. Findings that emanated from key informant interviews as well as focus group discussions, include the fact that local community members were merely passive receivers of information from municipal officials. This implies the lack of meaningful and active citizen participation in line with the ethos of participatory communication.

Additionally, although there were platforms for two-way communication between municipal officials and villagers during this period, including the use of WhatsApp as an efficient communication tool, it emerged during focus group discussions that this platform was mainly used for one-way message transmission (i.e., from officials to community members). There was therefore no dialogue between the parties involved since local villagers were not granted spaces where they could make meaningful contributions to the COVID-19 health communication process. In terms of the power relationship, municipal officials viewed themselves as the custodians of all the communication and they believed that they were empowered by legislation to take control of all public participation processes, given that they were also required to form a COVID-19 Command Council. It is for this reason that given the dominance of municipal officials' overall communication processes, local community members were forced to be passive receivers of information and all COVID-19 health messages, thus implying a lack of citizen empowerment in decision-making to alleviate the effects of the scourge.

These findings suggest the need for public participation policies, regulations and guidelines in the South African local government sphere to be rethought and overhauled. It is arguable that if participation, dialogue, and empowerment are approached from the perspective of participatory communication across the South African local government arena, local citizens would find themselves making meaningful contributions to public participation processes (including decision-making), which would lead to the alleviation of many of the challenges experienced, including the mostly violent sporadic unrest and protests.

In sum, this article makes an essential contribution to the nascent, but growing, body of knowledge devoted to the exploration of participatory communication and how it is employed in public participation processes in local government. Further research inquiry is recommended where qualitative and quantitative studies could be conducted in this area, thereby strengthening the need for further empirical review of Molale and Fourie's (2023) framework for participatory communication as a facilitator of public participation processes. A practical implication made by this study is that it calls for municipalities to rethink citizen participation processes to make way for more opportunities for genuine, active, and meaningful citizen participation through the facilitation of participation, dialogue and empowerment.

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