

The interrelatedness of the ward committee systems and community participation in South Africa: A critical approach to local governance

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the interconnection between ward committees and community participation. It argues that an effective, functional, and persuasive ward committee system promotes community participation. The paper also examines the efficacy of ward committees in enhancing such participation. Furthermore, it seeks to identify the challenges that hinder the effectiveness of ward committees and, finally, proposes solutions to improve the linkage between ward committees and community participation for better local governance. The paper provides a comprehensive review of the relevant legislative frameworks in South Africa, offering a solid contextual understanding of the political and legal landscape that governs ward committees and community participation. This conceptual paper draws heavily on secondary data and existing literature to address solutions related to the central argument. From the reviewed literature, the study identified several recurring issues, including maladministration (such as corruption and nepotism), a lack of understanding of the roles of ward committees, ineffective communication channels, and dysfunctional ward committee systems caused by political interference. Therefore, the paper recommends that further research be conducted across all municipalities in South Africa to uncover the challenges that hinder the effective linkage between ward committees and community participation, with the goal of promoting responsive and inclusive local governance that meets the diverse needs of society.

Keywords: *local municipality, ward committees, community participation, local governance, public participation, democracy*

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1. Introduction

The 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa lays the foundation for the country's democratic political system. Sections 152 of the Constitution ensure critical provisions about local government to offer democratic and accountable government for local communities and to inspire the involvement of communities and community organisations in local government matters. However, it is the primary responsibility of municipalities to safeguard the effective participation of the citizens and communities in matters of local government. The South African government, determined to address social, economic and political inequality post-1994, introduced a system of participatory democracy through ward committees aimed at developing democracy in the local sphere of government. The government created a space for community participation in its endeavor to sponsor community participation in local government (Mhari, 2014).

Section 74 of the Local Government Municipal Structures Act 1998 (Act 117 of 1998) strengthens democracy to speed up service delivery by bridging the gap between communities. This creates an enabling and supportive environment for meaningful community participation in local government and municipal structures. Municipal authorities must be legally obliged to involve community organizations in formulating budgets and planning developmental concerns through the integrated development planning (IDP) process. In addition to these initiatives, ward committees were considered a community participatory structure in the South African governance system. Community participation involves various stakeholders, including ward councillors, committee members, traditional leaders, and local business people, in the planning process. This includes aspects such as performance management, strategy development, project implementation, and monitoring (Oakley & Marsden, 1987; Mansuri & Rao, 2004). Community participation is understood as the involvement of citizens in the affairs of governance, planning and overall developmental programmes in the municipalities (Mafukidze & Hoosen, 2009).

During the past years, participation in local governance had no constitutional protection and was, therefore, characterized largely by the lack of probed spaces for community participation in development planning (Naudé, 2001; Williams, 2006: 200). Williams (2006) argues that there were limited opportunities for community participation for black people, as their political rights were largely denied. Consequently, only a small proportion of the population (white individuals) participated in development decisions that affected the black

majority. The blacks were politically silenced since the white minority hindered their participation. Nyalunga (2006) asserted that the apartheid failed the blacks. The African National Congress highlighted that one of the primary concerns of the democratic government after the 1994 elections was to promote participatory governance in both the government and civil society. Reddy (1996) argues that local government exists to make government accessible to citizens and to implement mechanisms that enable citizens to participate in the political and socio-economic processes that affect their lives.

There are legislations that support community involvement in the local government, including the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996, White Paper on Local Government of 1998, Local Government Municipal Structures Act 1998 (Act 117 of 1998), Local Government: Municipal Systems Act 2000 (Act 32 of 2000), Local Government: Municipal Finance Management Act 2003 (Act 56 of 2003), Local Government: Municipal Planning and Performance Regulations of 2001. However, the legislative framework is not limited to the aforementioned. Despite this provision, there is still a lack of community participation by rural communities in local government programmes, such as IDP consultations and Imbizos that seek to influence service delivery. Rural communities frequently face low literacy levels, which can result in a lack of knowledge and understanding about local government issues and the importance of their participation in community matters. It is also unclear to what extent ward committees indeed bring community responses and proposals to bear on local government decision-making (Bray, 1996; Everatt & Gwagwa, 2005; Hicks, 2006:).

The paper argues that ward committees' effective, functional, and persuasive system promotes community participation. Hence, it seeks to unwrap and scrutinize the interconnectedness of ward committees and community participation. This paper examines the significance and efficacy of ward committees in enhancing community participation. Furthermore, it seeks to identify the challenges that hinder the effectiveness of ward committees and propose solutions to improve the linkage between ward committees and community participation for better local governance. This paper provides a comprehensive review of the relevant legislative frameworks in South Africa, offering a solid contextual understanding of the political and legal landscape that governs ward committees and community participation.

2. Theoretical Framework

This theoretical paper relies on governance theory to guide and supplement the findings. Governance includes all stakeholders within a state, not simply the government bureaucracy. Lukman (2022) agrees that the conventional understanding of the word "governance" would encompass the entire government. Governance is the process of controlling societies in which no single actor may assert total authority. In modern society, the state is shifting formerly exclusive obligations to civil society, causing the state-society boundary to become increasingly blurred (Lukman, 2022). The term "governance" refers to a collection of institutions and persons both inside and outside of government. Governance highlights the necessity of independent, self-governing networks. It is feasible to become a power center at a certain level if the power wielded by public or private organizations is acknowledged by the public.

According to Keping (2018), the English word governance originated in Latin and ancient Greek and originally referred to control, guidance, and manipulation. Its definition has long overlapped with the term government, and it was mostly used to refer to administrative and political operations concerning national public affairs. However, in the 1990s, it was redefined by Western political scientists and economists. Since then, the word has come to signify far more than it did previously, and it is very different from what the term "government" signifies. The phrase in question is not limited to English, as it is commonly used by speakers of other major European languages. Additionally, it transcends political contexts, being applied in social and economic situations as well (Keping, 2018).

The terms governance and government are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to the same entity. The text highlights a distinction between two concepts of governance: the government's definition is considered 'old' governance, while other definitions not recognized as governance are referred to as 'new governance' (Katsamunska, 2016). Old governance is defined as the government's ability to create and implement policies or influence society (Kjar, 2004). On the other hand, Keping (2018) asserted that the current notion of governance (new governance) is a fluid concept with no one meaning.

For this paper, governance theory changes the emphasis away from government as the exclusive authority and toward governance as a networked, multi-actor process that includes both state and non-state players. A rigorous application of governance theory to ward committees and community engagement exposes both possibilities and constraints. While the

idea promotes decentralized, participatory, and networked government, South Africa's experience demonstrates that institutional design alone is insufficient. Ward committees are symbolic rather than revolutionary if power, ability, and political will are not addressed.

3. Methodology

This theoretical paper relies on a qualitative research approach wherein data findings were analyzed thematically. Ugwu and Eze (2023) employ qualitative research to better understand how people view their environment. This paper utilised exclusion criteria type of literature as the four dimensions such as politics, economics, social and culture form part and parcel of this study. To better comprehend ideas, views, or experiences, qualitative research entails collecting and evaluating non-numerical data (such as text, video, or audio). The explanatory research design was utilised to describe previously published material as well as pieces from journals. The explanatory research design seeks causes and reasons and offers data to support or contradict an explanation or prediction. The paper is analyzed thematically as the findings are in narrative form. It is used to find and report on correlations between various components of the event being studied. This article did not influence humans because the data was gathered from existing literature, including books, journals and case studies.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section seeks to discuss the findings from existing literature, books journals and case studies to supplement the study.

4.1. Ward Committees and Community Participation: The Linkage

Ward committees are essential for encouraging community involvement in local government. The connection between community involvement and ward committees is a cornerstone of decentralized governance systems. The decentralization system of governance is practiced in South Africa, where power is shared among the spheres of government. Mngayi (2021) asserts that the ward committee operates as a community watchdog and forms a link by effectively strengthening communication between the municipal council and the community it represents. In support of Mngayi (2021) and Van der Waldt (2007:37), Buccus and Hicks (2008:526) argue that the ward participatory systems of municipal government allow for the establishment of ward committees to enhance community participation. Ward committees are

intended to improve communication between the municipal council and local communities and play a role in identifying community demands. Among other functions, ward committees should be able to enhance participatory governance by collectively organizing communities within ward jurisdictions (Mnganyi, 2021).

Ianniello et al. (2019) articulate that community participation aims to enhance the quality and legitimacy of policy decisions, thus addressing problems faced by communities and their representatives. To address socio-economic development issues in municipalities, Ragolane and Malatji (2024) propose ward committees enhance community involvement in local government decision-making. Committees concerned with ward-related affairs are regarded as mechanisms that enable community participation within local government. Ward committees can serve as vehicles for promoting local participatory democracy. As a result, the rationale for their establishment is to ensure necessary contact between communities and government institutions. Furthermore, ward committees should also support the elected councillor in representing a specific sector in the municipal council, as outlined in Part 4 of the Municipal Structures Act.

Ward committees bridge the gap between local municipalities and communities by leveraging their knowledge and understanding of the citizens and communities they represent. In performing their duties, municipal councillors must respect the code of conduct in Schedule 5 of the Local Government: Municipal Structures Act 1998 (Act 117 of 1998). Goghta (2017) contends that ward committees determine core municipal processes such as integrated development planning, municipal budgeting, and municipal performance management. Ward committees help ensure that financial transfers from the national government are used for their intended purposes, such as ensuring that poor people receive basic services. Ward committees are elected to serve their communities and encourage community members to make themselves available to serve on these committees.

4.2. The Significance of Ward Committees in Promoting Community Participation: The Praxis

In light of the principles of local governance and community participation, this paper argues that the way socio-economic needs are addressed is influenced by ward committee practices. Ward committees enhance local service delivery by involving community members in decision-making, resource allocation, monitoring, and advocacy. Schedules 4 and 5 of the

1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa establish the legislation on local government that ensures clear mechanisms for the establishment of ward committees as structures that liaise with municipalities. As community representatives, municipalities are required to establish ward committees. It is necessary to consider whether it is essential for legislation to mandate municipalities to establish mechanisms for the consultation and involvement of communities in their operations and processes.

Most municipalities established ward committees to comply with legislation on community participation. Municipalities are required to implement lasting and effective models by ensuring that participation takes place through an established and institutionalised structure. They are the architects of the Local Government: Municipal Structures Act of 1998 (Act 117 of 1998) and the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. This legislation establishes that ward committees are essential components of local government and are instrumental in achieving the objectives of local governance and democracy. It is generally accepted that the ward committee is area-based. Mokoto et al. (2023) emphasize that community participation has consistently played a significant role in the governance of local governments. This crucial element has been implemented to enhance the quality of life for citizens, particularly those belonging to historically marginalized groups and those residing in rural areas.

Community participation is seen as a crucial aspect of the formation and success of local governments. According to Lowndes et al. (2019), community participation is responsible for delivering better outcomes and supporting good governance. This paper emphasizes that ward committees facilitate policy-making in local government. The initial stage of agenda-setting or policy demands occurs through the ward participatory system. Therefore, ward committees play a significant role in involving communities in decision-making to enhance service delivery effectively. In practice, ward committees facilitate the decision-making process by involving community members in the activities of the municipality in addressing socio-economic development.

4.3. Community Participation in Local Government: The Focus

Falanga (2020) and Bennett et al. (2022) articulate that local governments are increasingly developing new methods and organisational models of community participation, including a range of participatory activities and the allocation of resources for organizing

citizen participation. Additionally, Kurkela et al. (2024) concur with Pratchett (2004) in stating that local governments are settings where it is crucial to uphold the relationship between representational and participatory forms of democracy. According to Nabatchi and Amsler (2014), community participation can occur either in person (such as in citizen juries, forums, and councils) or online (such as through surveys).

Christensen and McQuestin (2019), Koens and Gunawardana (2021), Masuku and Macheke (2020), and Nikku and Rafique (2019) collectively address community participation as engagement at the grassroots level. Oni et al. (2020) highlight that community participation values include inclusiveness, openness, access, consultation, shared decisions, and transparency. In addition, Asamoah and Ile (2024) detail that community voices and participation are at the centre of democratic governance. For Petunia and Selepe (2024), community participation is the direct or indirect involvement of community members in policymaking and decision-making processes, irrespective of the level of local government. Asamoah and Ile (2024) view community participation as the process through which the government seeks input from communities on what they want their government to do, as well as how, when, and where they want it done. In terms of Section 19 of the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, every citizen is free to make political choices and participate in political processes.

This paper argues that community participation in local government plays a significant role in shaping municipal policies for better and more adequate service delivery. Community participation in local government is crucial for several reasons, as it enhances democratic governance, fosters civic engagement, and contributes to the overall development of a region. It promotes democratic governance, effective decision-making, civic engagement, improved service delivery, social cohesion and inclusivity, local economic development, trust-building, and educational and training opportunities. Hence, fostering community participation in local government makes it easier to meet and sustain the socio-economic needs of communities. Moreover, the concept of developmental local government empowers local governments to ensure that communities can participate in all municipal activities. Therefore, the effectiveness and efficiency of local government in delivering basic services and improving the lives of all residents rely heavily on community participation.

4.4. Community Participation and Public Participation: A Point of Convergence

Rijal (2023) discusses community participation as the active involvement of individuals, community groups, and civic organizations in creating and implementing plans and decision-making processes that affect their daily lives. Maela and Selepe (2023), on the other hand, articulate public participation as a process by which an organization consults with affected individuals, organizations, and government entities before making decisions. Public participation is considered a two-way communication and cooperative problem-solving process whose goal is to achieve better and more acceptable decisions.

This paper argues that while community and public participation ideally operate in similar ways, the distinction lies in the domains in which they function. The term "community participation" describes the active involvement of people or organizations within a particular community in projects or activities meant to improve the community or address its challenges. Typically, the themes center on a certain region or a population with shared identities, interests, or concerns. Community involvement initiatives include neighborhood watch programs, local development projects, community clean-up efforts, and community-based organizations (CBOs). On the other hand, "public participation" refers to the involvement of individuals in local, regional, national, or even global decision-making processes that affect them. The concept of public participation is broader than that of a specific community; it pertains to larger societal challenges, legislation, and governance frameworks. Public participation activities include town hall meetings, citizen advisory groups, online consultations, and public hearings held by the government or other organizations. Therefore, the concepts of community and public participation are often used interchangeably depending on the area of focus.

The objectives of community and public involvement are similar in that they promote inclusive decision-making processes, democratic governance, and civic engagement, despite differences in scope and emphasis. Understanding the connections between these two concepts can lead to more comprehensive and effective approaches to addressing societal issues and encouraging constructive social change.

4.5. Ward Committees and Integrated Development Plan: The Dawn

According to Chapter 5 of the Local Government: Municipal Systems Act 2000 (Act 32 of 2000), citizens must be involved in the preparation, implementation, and review of the IDP. The Act states that municipalities must create an IDP as part of a five-year process that

involves community input. Ward committees serve as a link between the community and the Ward Councillor, enabling them to influence local government processes in various ways, as noted by the Department of Local Government and Traditional Affairs (2006). Ward committees are entitled to regular updates on the municipality's financial situation as well as information about decisions made by the municipal council.

Ward committees can enhance their role in connecting with the IDP by gathering opinions from a wide range of community members. It is believed that each municipality's IDP serves as a comprehensive plan that provides a general framework for development. The White Paper on Local Government 1998 describes the IDP as a planning process and a tool that guides and shapes a municipality's administration, budgeting, planning, and decision-making practices.

This paper argues that ward committees are vital for an effective IDP, as their success depends on community participation. Ward committees play a crucial role in enhancing the effectiveness of IDPs by facilitating community participation, promoting transparency, and ensuring local needs are accurately represented in the planning process. Their involvement ensures that IDPs are responsive to local needs, inclusive of diverse perspectives, and implemented in a manner that fosters sustainable development and social cohesion at the grassroots level. Therefore, before the implementation of the IDP, ward committees must encourage community members to participate. The effectiveness of the IDP relies on community participation as enforced by the ward committee system. In summary, the IDP serves as the beginning of community participation.

4.6. Maladministration in the Ward Committee System: The Threats

The main reason for creating ward committees was to foster community participation between local municipalities and communities. However, the functioning of these ward committees is often characterized by maladministration. The threat of maladministration leads to greed, lack of skills and competencies, poor access to information, underspending, lack of capacity building, and resource constraints, among others. One of the issues arising from the election of ward committee members is that many interest groups may wish to be part of the local government structure. However, according to the Local Government: Municipal Structures Act 1998 (Act 117 of 1998), a maximum of ten members can serve on a ward committee. The ex-officio representatives may help address these issues.

The State of Local Governance Report in COGTA (2009:41) emphasizes that party politics, accompanied by greed and a general lack of values, principles, and ethics, significantly contribute to the progressive deterioration of municipal functionality. Many officials and public representatives are not concerned with public service and are only interested in self-enrichment, which constitutes maladministration. Dela et al. (2021) emphasized that corruption is a wrongful act in which individuals abuse their power and attempt to acquire public resources for private gain. Corruption has adverse effects on the political, economic, and social development of the country, as well as on good governance.

Ward committees face various obstacles, one of which is the low level of education among local populations. As noted by the Human Science Research Council (2022), for the local community to engage effectively in municipal matters, ward committees must possess the necessary knowledge to contribute meaningfully. In most rural communities, the level of education is low. Locals often cannot comprehend development activities and, as a result, are unable to empower one another. Ward committees are presided over by ward council members, who may eventually become more interested in gaining political points than in furthering community interests.

The challenges confronting ward committees in South Africa arise not only from insufficient legal frameworks but also from deficiencies in current policy structures, institutional processes, and programmatic initiatives. These shortcomings hinder the effective fulfillment of the government's constitutional and legislative obligations (Mngayi, 2021). Mngayi (2021) further observes that one of the grassroots-level problems jeopardizing the success of ward councils is the perceived lack of public interest in local government processes. This presents an opportunity for improvement and revitalization. By fostering greater community involvement and awareness, the effectiveness and viability of ward councils can be enhanced.

Maladministration within local governance structures, characterized by inefficiency, corruption, insufficient transparency, and inadequate oversight, weakens the essential relationship between ward committees and community participation. This disconnection ultimately compromises the development and implementation of effective public policies. The interconnectedness of ward committees and community engagement is fundamental to inclusive, bottom-up policy formulation. When maladministration prevails, this relationship is disrupted, resulting in unresponsive, misaligned, and poorly executed policies. Addressing

these issues requires structural reforms, enhanced oversight, transparent processes, and political commitment to restore the integrity of local governance mechanisms.

This paper argues that unethical behavior on the part of political and municipal leaders compromises the integrity of ward committees by creating resource shortages. Corruption causes the failure of current policies and a lack of public interest in municipal activities. Consequently, the inability of the ward committee system to enhance community participation can be attributed to its failure to address unethical behavior.

Local government and community development suffer greatly from corruption and poor management in ward committee systems. Ward committees are intended to be crucial tools for participatory democracy, providing a platform for community voices in local government and ensuring that community interests are addressed. However, when these systems are undermined by corruption and mismanagement, several issues arise, including poor accountability and communication, underspending for personal gain, misuse of capacity-building funds, insufficient resources, and inadequate training. This paper argues that the ward committee system will only function effectively if corruption and maladministration are adequately addressed.

4.7. Tackling Community Participation Through the Ward Committee Systems: Therapies

This paper argues that to effectively combat corruption and maladministration within ward committees, policymakers must implement strong accountability mechanisms, improve transparency in decision-making processes, enhance oversight by relevant authorities, and foster a culture of integrity and ethical leadership among committee members. Furthermore, empowering residents through civic education, awareness campaigns, and accessible channels for reporting corruption can help prevent these harmful behaviors and ensure that ward committees fulfill their responsibility to serve the community's best interests. The paper further argues that ward committee systems should collaborate with traditional leadership structures to encourage community participation in all municipal activities.

4.7.1. Expansion of the role of ward committees

The World Trade Organization (2022) states that the ward committee system should be reviewed. Some ward committee members lack initiative and fail to develop plans of action

for the committee. This significantly impacts the committee's ability to function as a communication mechanism between community structures and individual citizens.

Perhaps ward committee members should be remunerated or provided with financial assistance for their involvement (World Trade Organization, 2022). Ward committees could also be granted greater decision-making powers within their respective wards. It could be argued that the role of Community Development Workers should be revised to avoid conflict with ward committee functions. However, this would require empowering ward committees to act as liaisons, while Community Development Workers would support them. Duma (2019) suggested that, through legislative amendments, policy changes, and other means, ward committees should be given expanded roles. Within a clear framework and through an incremental, experimental approach, municipalities must consider delegating limited powers to ward committees, as permitted by law. He further suggests that ward committee systems should take responsibility for ward development plans that inform and respond to the IDPs. Ward committees must prepare annual profiles of the ward community and oversee service delivery and development in the ward.

4.7.2 Ward councillors and committees collaboration in identification of interest groups

According to Duma (2019), ward councillors and ward committees should work together to create a database of all civil society organizations and interest groups that are active in their wards. They should also ensure that these groups are represented on the ward committee. When a group's interests are impacted by a ward issue and they are not represented, the ward committee must communicate with such groups. Examples of interest groups include organizations that work with abused women and children, sports teams, child welfare agencies, and school governing bodies. The municipality can set up special procedures to handle the needs and involvement of particular interest groups, such as focus groups, non-governmental organizations, and community-based organizations, in addition to their participation in ward committee activities. This can be a very helpful tool when addressing the needs and interests of vulnerable groups.

4.7.3 Ward committee's constant interaction with traditional leaders

The White Paper on Local Government of 1998 highlights the importance of traditional leaders in resolving local conflicts and recognizes their frequent consultative responsibilities across all branches of government. Ramolobe (2023) argues that traditional leaders nationwide

must be positioned at the forefront of rural community development due to their significant influence over their followers. In light of this, it is important to promote a long-term partnership between ward committees and traditional leadership. If the current administration truly wants to see rural communities flourish, traditional leaders need to reclaim their status. In other words, traditional authorities should not feel isolated and marginalized due to ward committees and council members assuming their roles and rendering them irrelevant in their communities.

4.7.4 Training and capacity development

As stipulated in the Guidelines for the Establishment and Operation of Municipal Ward Committees, training is widely acknowledged and promoted. Municipalities are also required to provide capacity building to facilitate active community engagement. Building capacity is one of the most crucial tools for restructuring, particularly in the context of local government. The concept of developmental local government can be meaningfully described through training, education, reorientation, assistance, monitoring, and the transfer of information, skills, and knowledge when applied appropriately. Ward committees cannot function effectively without undergoing capacity building. Therefore, ward committees must be trained before performing their municipal tasks. Additionally, ward committees must conduct annual assessments of their training and capacity-building needs. Annual training programs should be developed for each ward committee member to ensure effectiveness in municipal affairs. It is essential to prepare the annual budget for the capacity-building and training program based on the assessed needs.

4.8 Legislative Framework Underpinning the Ward Committee Systems and Community Participation: The Mandate

Sections 53 to 55 of the White Paper on Local Government (1998) stipulate that the community can participate at the following levels: as voters to ensure the maximum democratic accountability of the elected political leadership for the policies they promote; as citizens who express their views through various stakeholder associations before, during, and after the policy development process to ensure that the policies reflect community preferences as far as possible; as consumers and end-users who expect value for money, quality services, and courteous and responsive interactions; and as partners who can be involved in organizing resources for development.

Ward committees should function as an important medium between communities and municipalities and encourage participatory democracy. They consist of elected officials and serve as focused participatory structures. Section 74 of the Local Government: Municipal Structures Act 1998 (Act 117 of 1998) lists the powers and functions of ward committees, including making recommendations on any matters affecting a ward to the ward councillor. The Act emphasizes community participation by stating that executive committee members must report on the community's involvement in municipal affairs, confirm community participation and consultation, and report the effects thereof on council decisions.

The Local Government: Municipal Systems Act 2000 (Act 32 of 2000) provides guidance on establishing and operating municipal ward committees, including how they are planned to operate and the expected conduct of their members. Although the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA) 2003 (Act 56 of 2003) does not specifically mention ward committees, it calls for community participation in overseeing the use and reporting of municipal resources. Section 23 of the MFMA stipulates that the municipal council must reflect the views of the local community when tabling the budget for approval. Section 84 requires a community participation process before a municipality establishes a municipal entity. According to Section 130, council meetings must be open to the public and organs of state, and sufficient time must be provided to discuss any written submissions received from the local community or organs of state on the annual report.

4.9 Case Studies

According to Blouberg News (2025), CDM acknowledged the request from the community of Ward 4 in Blouberg Municipality and met with their representatives to discuss water challenges in the area. The meeting took place on 27 March 2025. Villages represented included, among others, Diviliersdale, Swartz, Driekopies, Montz, Madibeng, and Silvermine. One of the pressing issues raised was the need to augment the existing water infrastructure due to the increasing number of households in these villages, and to improve the turnaround time for repairing damaged infrastructure.

In her response, Cllr. Monica Mohale, CDM MMC for Infrastructure, expressed a commitment to engaging with the community to explore sustainable solutions to the water shortages and challenges facing the area. She emphasized that the municipality is aware of the critical need for a reliable water supply and is actively working to address the infrastructure

issues contributing to these challenges. Cllr. Mohale further assured the community that CDM would work together with them to ensure that regular consultations with residents continue. The municipality understands the difficulties caused by water shortages and is dedicated to finding both short-term and long-term solutions. These Blouberg Municipality reports validate and support the importance of ward committees in enhancing community participation for good governance. The ward committee system connects communities with the municipality.

4.10 Lessons Learned

An important insight derived from analyzing the relationship between ward committees and community participation in South Africa is that the structural design of such committees alone cannot ensure effective community participation in local governance. Although ward committees were established as mechanisms to enhance participatory democracy and facilitate the connection between communities and municipalities, their practical efficacy has been hindered by various systemic and political challenges. While ward committees are intended to represent community interests, in practice, participation often remains symbolic rather than substantive. This situation creates a disconnect between community needs and the committee's capacity to influence municipal decisions.

Many communities express feelings of exclusion or disempowerment when their inputs are not visibly acted upon. A significant lesson is the necessity of capacity building and accountability within ward committee structures. The absence of adequate training, resources, and clearly defined roles undermines their effectiveness. When committee members are not adequately empowered, the system becomes susceptible to elite capture or political manipulation, further diminishing community trust. The top-down nature of many municipal processes limits the autonomy and influence of ward committees, confining them to consultative rather than decision-making roles, thereby weakening their legitimacy. A critical analysis reveals that institutional power dynamics must be reformed to genuinely facilitate grassroots participation.

Community engagement goes beyond mere attendance at meetings; it involves ongoing interaction, responsiveness, and the establishment of trust. If communities perceive ward committees as ineffective or politically biased, they are likely to disengage. The essential lesson is that authentic participation must be cultivated through transparency, inclusivity, and demonstrable outcomes. Despite the existence of policies advocating participatory governance,

their implementation remains inconsistent. The key takeaway is that a gap persists between policy intentions and actual practice, primarily due to inadequate monitoring, insufficient funding, and fluctuating political will.

5. Recommendations and Conclusion

The paper recommends further research in South African municipalities to explore challenges hindering the effective linkage between ward committees and community participation. This recommendation is justifiable as it seeks to address ongoing issues such as maladministration, corruption, political interference, and poor communication channels, which continue to hinder the success of ward committees in promoting active community participation. Furthermore, such research can lead to actionable recommendations to improve governance and service delivery at the local level, thereby addressing socio-economic challenges effectively.

The paper also recommends that ward committee members be provided with training and opportunities for capacity building to help them become more proficient in leadership, governance, project management, and conflict resolution. It should be standard practice to equip committee members with the knowledge and skills needed to carry out their responsibilities and make meaningful contributions to the development of their communities. Mechanisms must be established to gather community input on ward committee performance and on the implementation of projects and initiatives. Such mechanisms may include online feedback portals, community hotlines, or suggestion boxes. Regularly seeking and responding to feedback, according to the research, demonstrates accountability and responsiveness.

Ward committees serve as important tools in addressing issues of maladministration within local governance. Their effectiveness, however, is contingent upon robust policies, efficient management by municipalities, and active engagement from the community. To enhance the impact of these committees, policymakers, municipal officials, and community leaders need to work collaboratively. This collaboration should focus on strengthening committee structures, promoting civic education, and ensuring that the voices of community members are not only heard but also acted upon. By fostering inclusive participation and maintaining vigilant oversight, communities can significantly contribute to the development of transparent, accountable, and responsive local governments.

Moreover, the paper recommends the promotion of civic education and awareness-raising programs to provide community members with the information they need to understand their rights, obligations, and the most effective ways to engage with ward committees and local government systems. Educated community members who possess relevant knowledge and awareness are more inclined to participate in community affairs. Ward committees must practice transparency in their decision-making processes by ensuring that agendas and minutes are published, meetings are open to the public, and decisions are properly recorded and communicated. The goal of transparency is to build community trust and encourage committee members to be accountable for their actions.

The committee's performance and the impact of their work should be assessed through the establishment of monitoring and evaluation systems. These systems should be adaptable to identify obstacles, assess progress toward goals, and improve efficiency and effectiveness over time. The paper also recommends encouraging coordination and cooperation between local government representatives and ward committees. It is essential to establish clear communication channels and coordination procedures to ensure alignment of priorities and efficient implementation of projects and programs.

In conclusion, the paper asserts that ward committees can enhance their capacity to promote community involvement, foster inclusive governance, and drive positive transformation at the local level by implementing the aforementioned recommendations. The ward committee system is inherently linked to community participation, as ward committees represent community members in the Municipal Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and other local governance structures. The paper concludes that the interconnectedness of ward committees and communities is crucial in addressing socio-economic challenges at the grassroots level.

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AI Declaration

The author declares the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the author used Quillbot for paraphrasing ideas. The author takes full responsibility for ensuring proper review and editing of content generated using AI.

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