Community Participation in Mahikeng Local Municipality: Power Relations Perspective

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Abstract

In South Africa, community members have the constitutional right to partake in local governance and the local municipal council has the constitutional mandate to facilitate community participation. Qualitative research was used to assess the impact of power relations on community participation in the Mahikeng Local Municipality. The study findings indicate that power differentials contributed to the abandonment of the legislative provisions in the Mahikeng Local Municipality in the North-West Province of South Africa. Among other things, this paper recommends finalisation of the draft public participation framework. The framework should clearly identify and define the roles of the community, elected councillors and traditional authorities. The paper recommends the development of a strategy that includes clear and comprehensive public participation guidelines, protocols and processes to facilitate implementation of the framework. In consultation with the community, a detailed community participation schedule must be developed, implemented and continuously monitored and evaluated.

Keywords

Community participation, democracy and development planning, local governance, power relations

Introduction

Community participation at the most fundamental level, particularly with disadvantaged groups, has become increasingly vital in the international development discourse. It has been made an integral element of local governance administration and management in South Africa, as prescribed in the Constitution Act no. 108 of 1996; the Local Government: Municipal Structures Act no. 117 of 1998; the White Paper on Local Government and the Public Participation Framework of 1998. These Acts require local municipalities country-wide to put in place measures, processes and

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systems to promote, encourage and sustain community participation in policy formulation and implementation in respect of local development matters. The purpose of entrenching community participation through such a legislative framework is to ensure that the delivery of public services by the local municipalities is people-centred and embedded within the country's democratic framework.

Voluminous quality research work (Ledwith, 2011; Williams, 2005) has been conducted to evaluate success and failure in community participation in local governance and basic social service delivery. However, not many of these studies focus on the effect of the hierarchy of power and social divisions. Therefore, given that the power that comes with authority has the potential to deter community participation became necessary to be tested in this context.

Power is described as the ability of a structure, or an individual, to influence the will of the various stakeholders, including community members (Han et al., 2014). Power relations are, therefore, determined by how groups or individuals relate in specific settings, in terms of how those with power exercise it over those without it. It is for this reason that, Korpi (1989), Ferguson (1990) and Hickey and Mohan (2005), have defined power as the type of authority or force given to a state structure to apply it, whether reasonable or not. Kenny (1999: 149) defined power as, "the ability to impose one's will against the will or interest of others". Similarly, Castell (2016) saw it as the ability of a particular role player to coerce or sway the minds of others. Kipmis (2003) pointed out that the issue of power in any relationship is inescapable. The policy may say one thing about community participation in local governance but the implementers can choose to act in contravention of the policy. What is important, therefore, is to determine if power is used to facilitate good or bad local governance in the Mahikeng Local Municipality. Griffiths et al. (2009) asserted that sometimes power is used to distort policy, or even exclude development stakeholders, such as community members. As a result, it may be assumed that power is sometimes used to facilitate bad governance.

In contrast to this, Nantongo et al. (2019) viewed power as an exercise in preventing conflict from emerging in the first place, through shaping people's perceptions and preferences so that they can accept and claim ownership of any initiative that is on the agenda.

These two definitions claim that among two parties, in this case local governance and the community, one may have absolute power, while the other has no or limited power. Buccus et al. (2008) stated that there is an acknowledgement from the South African local governmental sector that despite the existing policy frameworks and various forms of interventions, less attention is paid to community participation in local government. Furthermore, the situation still persists even though many scholars, including Nelson et al. (2006), Buccus et al. (2008) and Hicks (2010), have highlighted this problem through research work ever since the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994. De Beer and Swanepoel (2011) emphasised that local communities are key participants in the development process, and it is, therefore, important to create an enabling environment for them to exercise their democratic rights. According to these scholars, the idea of community participation seems acceptable to all, but its implementation appears to be problematic, especially at local government level. This sphere of government is closest to the people and directly interacts with the local populace, providing basic services that directly affect people's lives.

The power imbalance with respect to decision making in local governance matters in the African development context has been observed by scholars such as Makuwira (2018); Nantongo et al. (2019); Satyal (2018) and Denney et al. (2018). In a similar manner, Williams (2007) argued that local power dynamics are concealed by accepting too easily what is termed a community, without critically exploring it, such that the conceptualisation and practice of community participation becomes clear. While there could be many factors associated with a lack of, or poor, community participation in the Mahikeng Local Municipality, this paper only focuses on analysing the impact

of power relationships between the elected local councillors and community members, and the community's involvement. Although policy and institutional structures have been established in South Africa, it is increasingly becoming evident that all is not well in local government. This paper, therefore, aims to establish if those who are in leadership and positions of authority inevitably give themselves power and the prerogative to make decisions on behalf of the citizens by excluding the latter from the decision-making processes, in effect negating the constitutional rights of citizens.

Methodology

Qualitative research methods were used in this study to explore the perceptions of community members and ward councillors on how power differentials affect community participation in governance in the Mahikeng Local Municipality. A criterion-based sampling method was used to select a sample of 379 adult community members from a total population of 200,000 adults, who were residing in the study area. This sample size was determined on the basis of the sample size determination table suggested by Kreijie and Morgan (1970).

Data were collected through the use of a questionnaire, comprising open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews. Questionnaires and focus group discussions were used to obtain data from community members, while semi-structured interviews were held with ward councillors. The questionnaire was used to source the perceptions of community members on the involvement of people in the governance of their local municipality. In contrast, semi-structured interviews were used to solicit information from ward councillors about how the community's participation in governance was facilitated and coordinated in the study area.

The total number of focus groups was five. Three focus groups had six members and two groups had five members each, which comprised both females and males. Each group had two sessions. The focus group discussions were used to explore issues raised in the interviews and also uncover issues that may not have been raised by the questionnaire. Lastly, all the data were combined and discussed under various themes emanating from the research question.

Results and discussion

In this section, data from interviews with ward councillors, community members and focus group discussions were used to assess the impact of power relations on community participation at the local government level.

Conceptualisation of community participation in local government

The perceptions of the community members within Mahikeng Local Municipality were that 'community participation' means that the people must make suggestions with regard to governance and policies, as well as the delivery of public services. Their perception was that decisions must be based on the input made by the community, as they are responsible for their own development.

Walker and Shannon (2011) indicated that the more community members feel that their inputs are ignored, the greater the likelihood that they will feel discouraged and demotivated. During focus group discussion some participants explained that:

> Community participation means that we as community members must tell the ward councillors and ward committees what our development needs are and what we think should be done to address them. Furthermore, community participation means that we (the community) should be in partnership with the

municipal council, authorities and other stakeholders see to it that we discuss our problems and come up with projects that must be included in the IDP **[integrated development planning]** and be budgeted for so that our lives can be improved because we have the right to economic development.

The community members indicated that they based their conceptualisation of community participation on *puso ya batho ka batho* [government of the people by the people] and *Batho Pele* [people first] principles, which implies that the people should govern and services should be people-oriented. The views expressed by community members reflect the definition of community participation given by many scholars in the field of development (Buccus et al., 2008; Eversole, 2012; Lahiri-Dutt, 2004; Walker and Shannon, 2011) . These scholars describe community participation as the actual involvement of communities in driving and taking charge of decision-making processes, pertaining to initiating, planning and managing development initiatives and resources, as well as sharing the outcomes of those initiatives.

Less than 50% of the ward councillors share the same sentiments and they emphasised that community participation in local government means that the community must take part actively in local government, thus determining and influencing the development agenda. The majority (58%) of the ward councillors, in contrast, hold the view that community participation refers to the engagement of community members in decision making processes. Such engagement, they opined, can take place in different forms, and at different levels. For example, one of these ward councillors explained that:

Sometimes it is necessary for ward councillors to present matters which are in the best interest of the community to the council and once approved by the council, the matter can then be presented to the community for them to give input about implementation.

The conceptualisation of community participation by the councillor clearly contradicts the idea that participation is about a 'bottom up' approach, and the active, direct involvement of community members at all stages of developmental initiatives. The view held by the councillors suggests the kind of development which is centred in authority and not on the people themselves. From this perspective, it seems as if that power lies in the hands of the councillors because decisions are made at council level and the community is only consulted afterwards.

Cornwall (2008) regarded this type of involvement as manipulative participation because the involvement of the community is limited. Lahiri-Dutt (2004) supported the view that this type of consultation is limiting because it is about presenting an already decided upon idea to the community, instead of giving them an opportunity to take part in its conceptualisation. This partial participation is at the discretion of the councillors, which suggests that power is at play. Furthermore, community members exlpained that even though they had attended more than 90% of ward and municipal meetings they had never had a discussion about conceptualisation of community development with the ward councillors and municipal officials. This situation puts the community in a disadvantaged position as it now relies on the council to implement and facilitate community participation at its own discretion.

Section 152 of the Constitution of South Africa 1996 gives a local municipality council the responsibility to influence the conceptualisation of community participation. Be that as it may, while the Local Government Structures Act 117 of 1998 clearly provides the roles that the ward committee, ward councillor and municipal council ought to play in the facilitation of participatory development, the specific roles of community members are not provided. Such gaps in legislation give the councillors the opportunity to use their positions of authority to create spaces for controlling and manipulating community participation. Denney et al. (2018) emphasised community

participation as being the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders in the planning and implementation of community development initiatives. It is, therefore, argued that while ward councillors have a knowledge and understanding of what community participation entails, they deliberately choose a flawed interpretation to advance their personal interests.

The value of community participation in Mahikeng Local Municipality

Community members explained that by participating, they would stand a better chance of making suggestions towards IDP and this would foster a sense of shared purpose, ownership and responsibility, as suggested by Eversole (2012). The community members indicated that taking part in ward development initiatives would create unity among them, because they would have a common interest.

One community member, during a focus group discussion, expressed her view as follows:

> When we are having discussions about issues which are of great concern to the majority of the community and we also agree on how to address them, that unites us and we become one. So the more we talk about our development issues as a community the more united we become.

Brinkerhoff and Johnson (2009) shared a similar sentiment and further explained that collective action by the community breeds a sense of ownership of the outcomes of development initiatives, whether negative or positive. While this is the case, it is interesting to note that the majority of the youth who took part in the study explained that they have participated in governance processes, such as IDP meetings, where they received information about development opportunities.

The practice of community participation in Mahikeng Local Municipality

The study's findings reveal that while community participation does take place in Mahikeng Local Municipality, there is no specific budget, human resources and unit for public participation activities. Public participation activities are coordinated by officials in the speaker's office. However, all the ward councillors concurred with the community members that public participation in Mahikeng Local Municipality is not well coordinated. It seems that the council and its structures use the public to endorse local development initiatives that were crafted in their absence and that then the councillors play a role of ratifying such decisions. This, according to community members, is superficial participation, which defeats that intended in the Constitution to entrench democracy. Buccus et al. (2008) supported the view that meaningful community participation strengthens and deepens democracy, if people make suggestions about what they think and know can better their lives. The more this happens, the more democratic the local municipality becomes.

Some of the ward councillors stated the opinion that indeed there is public participation in Mahikeng Local Municipality, which can be supported with evidence in the form of attendance registers. In contrast, some councillors supported the view of community members, that their participation should be judged on the basis of inclusion of their needs and relevant projects in any integrated development plan, rather than attendance registers. Lehtonen (2006) supported the view held by community members that participation through democratic structures should involve open discussion, robust debate and reflective thinking about the subject under consideration. Ledwith (2011) stated that the failure of community members to be vigilant, focused and analytic, subjected them to manipulation and weakening.

Evaluation of the performance of the municipal councils and officials by stakeholders, such as community members, is a critical element of the local government system in South Africa.

However, there is inadequate evidence of people's participation in evaluating the municipal council and officials' performance. The council, in this study, was not in possession of records that show any feedback from community members or stakeholders, as far as the evaluation of community participation activities is concerned.

Legislative framework for community participation

Discontent was reported about a lack of community participation in policy matters in Mahikeng Local Municipality. Community members feel disgruntled because whenever there is a need to develop byelaws or policies, the council involves them only after such policies are drafted and other stakeholders have already been consulted. Ianniello et al. (2019) indicated that the aim of community participation is to enhance the quality and legitimacy of policy decisions, thus overcoming the problems faced by communities and their representatives.

The ward councillors reported that while it is a legislative requirement that each municipality should have a public participation framework, the Mahikeng Local Municipality has just recently begun developing its own. The Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 and the Constitution are used as the basis for community participation in all local municipalities, including Mahikeng Local Municipality. This legislation merely provides a general framework and it is, therefore, still important that a local municipality develop a specific community participation framework, which is informed by local needs, desires, aspirations and the environment which it is supposed to develop.

This framework in Mahikeng Local Municipality has a number of weaknesses already. These include unclear roles and protocols, no mention of a designated public participation unit, no mention of a public participation strategy, silence on the budget and human resources, and no indication of monitoring and evaluation tools and processes. Hicks (2010) argued that without these input resources, effective community participation cannot be realised. The gaps that are identified in the draft community participation framework and the basic resources required for the implementation of community participation demonstrate a lack of willingness on the part of the council to make it possible for communities to take part in local governance and development matters.

The failure of the council to set up a public participation office is regarded by some of the councillors as being tantamount to defiance of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and the local government legislation that established the council. Such defiance of law can be viewed as a deliberate action by the council to relegate public participation to an insignificant responsibility, whereas it is, in actual fact, a key performance indicator. This is viewed by community members as a strategy to use power to exclude them from governance processes in their own local municipality. Cornwall and Brock (2005) shared a similar sentiment by explaining that questions such as who has the power and how it is used in governance must take precedence in local governance practices and discourse.

Budget and IDP meetings

The majority of community members and ward councillors reported that they had attended IDP meetings. The Mahikeng Local Municipal Council used IDP meetings to receive input for IDP from various stakeholders, including the community members. The purpose of such meetings is to share with stakeholders how the funds are utilised, as required by the Municipal Finance Management Act no. 56 of 2003. Some community members regarded these meetings as a platform for creating expectations that are never fulfilled. However, community members and ward councillors expressed equal concern about feedback mechanisms and the lack of well-coordinated methods for providing feedback and follow up on issues raised in public meetings. Be that as it

may, community members do not seem to hold the local government accountable for not putting the required mechanisms in place. This finding concurs with those of Ianniello et al. (2019), that most communities lack knowledge of government processes and mechanisms for monitoring and holding local government accountable.

As explained by community members, pertinent documents to the meetings, such as the annual budget report and the IDP, were not made available as hard copies at the municipal offices and public spaces, or published electronically for people to read and interact with. Instead, the documents were usually distributed during those meetings giving community members and other stakeholders limited time to interrogate such reports, yet they were expected to make meaningful input.

Ianniello et al. (2019) pointed out that in most countries there is lack of participatory budgeting processes, particularly as local governments are unable to reflect the priorities of local communities. Community members argued that this is a strategy to prevent community structures from consulting among themselves, thus further reducing opportunities for community participation. Ledwith (2011) also found that without appropriate knowledge one is powerless. The ward councillors attributed this situation to the absence of public participation personnel and a unit.

As recommended by Cullen and Coryn (2011), engagement and consultation with community members should not be limited to discussion alone but it should be a reflective, thoughtful and intellectual debate which leads to making decisions that can facilitate sustainable development efforts.

All the research participants explained that the time and duration of meetings are determined by the council. Community members are not given the opportunity to make suggestions in that regard. This implies that the council takes it upon itself to determine the schedule for the meetings without due consultation with community members and stakeholders.

Furthermore, the majority of community members and ward councillors indicated that the community's needs and any request for specific projects are often not taken into consideration. Community members from two different wards explained that:

> We requested installation of water pipes in our yards in 2005 and it was agreed that it should be included in the IDP. In 2010 we were still promised the same thing but until today, this has not happened.

> During the 2010 IDP meeting, we asked for Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses and we were told they will be built. When we enquired during the 2011 budget review, we were told this can only be considered in the next IDP budgeting process. This shows that our projects will forever be shifted to the next financial year.

These experiences have led community members to conclude that power and authority are used to suppress or postpone their needs. Most of the ward councillors who took part in the study admitted that the council is unable to meet the competing needs of all the wards due to budgetary constraints.

Nantongo et al. (2019) affirmed that power, in this context, is the most used tool to influence decision making or to block what is included on the agenda. Van der Merve et al. (2010) strongly believed that if community members have power, they can devise strategies to reduce poverty, illiteracy, joblessness and any other form of injustice affecting them.

Ward meetings and ward development planning

All community members reported that ward meetings coordinated by the ward councillor and the ward committee do take place in some wards. While in certain wards such meetings are held

regularly, in other wards, they only take place once in six months or at the discretion of the ward councillor. The findings indicate that failure by the ward committees to meet regularly resulted in them experiencing challenges with regard to facilitating public participation. Sekgala (2016) made a similar observation and stated that the ward committee members are sometimes actually hindered by a lack of relevant knowledge and skills in their efforts to perform their roles.

Community members expressed dissatisfaction with the current electoral system for ward councillors, who are the chairpersons of the ward committees. The majority of community members and a quarter of the councillors suggested that the electoral system needs to be reviewed. They recommended that a constituent community and not a political party should nominate and elect its preferred candidate. The rationale for this is that this may reduce party politicking within the ward system, and encourage effective mass participation, as the ward councillor would be accountable to the community and not a particular political party. This situation confirms Nantongo et al.'s (2019) study findings that participation may not lead to empowerment and genuine control if the structures and processes of participation reinforce the underlying power differential among the different stakeholders.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Mahikeng Local Municipality reinvigorate and solidify community participation through various processes. The municipality should speedily finalise the draft public participation framework as the implementation of strategies including clear public participation guidelines, protocols and processes is key in facilitating effective community participation. Such a framework should clearly identify and define the roles and responsibilities of communities, the municipal council, officials, and other relevant stakeholders, to avoid ambiguity and confusion. It is further recommended that those stipulated roles are linked to specific key performance areas of municipal officials and the council members.

The municipality should ensure the establishment of a public participation unit that has adequate physical and human resources for effective implementation policies that promote community participation. This will facilitate the development of a detailed community participation schedule, in consultation with the community. Such community participation schedules should vividly indicate the purpose of activities as well as articulate information about timeous access to relevant documents.

The local municipality ought to promote and facilitate regular consultative meetings between community members, ward committees and the municipal council. The outcomes of such consultative meetings should ultimately be given cognisance in the formulation of IDP.

It is recommended that the local municipality conduct regular public satisfaction surveys aimed at evaluating its effectiveness in implementing community participation. Furthermore, development and proper utilisation of feedback mechanisms should be prioritised. Quarterly review of development plans and municipal reports to ensure timeous implementation of corrective measures where required is highly recommended. Local municipalities should ensure that systems and strategies that reinforce sustainable good performance are developed and effectively implemented.

Conclusion

Participation by members of the community in local governance is regarded by the constitution of South Africa as one of the key pillars of democracy because it gives communities an opportunity to take part directly in development management, planning, monitoring and evaluation. This study

illustrated that the supreme law in this country provides a clear framework on the constitutional responsibilities of the elected and appointed officials as well as those of community members. It therefore should not create space for these to be second guessed. While the role of community members is to actively determine and lead their own development process, officials ought to create conducive conditions for this to happen. As a result, true community participation is a strong foundation for democracy and effective governance in its true meaning and not merely a superficial consultation. However, it is clear from the study that the majority of the research participants, including councillors, are not satisfied with how power and authority are exercised in the governance of their municipality.

People in positions of authority use their power to prevent community participation in local governance. Such power is used to discourage community members from taking part in local governance, through actions ranging from failure to organise ward meetings, inaccessible public meetings, imposition of the agenda, failure to provide feedback, inadequate turnaround time and inappropriate times for the meetings. It is clear from this list that deliberate efforts are made to deny communities platforms that should be used to influence local development and decision making. Such actions frustrate community participation and therefore defeat the intention of democratising local governance and public service delivery.

The fact that there is no consensus on the meaning and understanding of community participation exposes communities to being taken advantage of by ward councillors. This seems to be a self-empowerment strategy for the councillors which they use to determine how they facilitate community participation despite what the law prescribes. Consequently, councillors implement community participation at their own discretion. The will of the council more often than not takes precedent. What compounds the problem is that as much as public participation is a legislative requirement, there are no special resources, such as a coordinating unit, budget and human resources, budgeted for it. The lack of clarity in participation guidelines also hinders people from having a meaningful impact on local governance. This seems to be a strategy of disempowering communities. The local municipal officials and elected councillors still approach development from an elitist or superior perspective. However, communities also contribute to this anomaly by not using the same legislation to demand to be allowed to participate. Communities should, therefore, take responsibility for a weak local governance system because lack of participation on their part perpetuates it. Further studies need to be conducted to investigate the extent to which community members weaken the local governance system.

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