



# Participatory Communication for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods

## *Insights from Matatiele Local Municipality*

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### Abstract

Traditional top-down approaches exclude communities from participating in policy design and decision-making, while existing communication models are inadequate in addressing communication and service delivery challenges in rural municipalities. And Matatiele Local Municipality (MLM) is no exception. This study is focusing on Matatiele Local Municipality's use of participatory communication (PC) processes in line with democratic principles and their impact on service delivery. It explores the communication practices, the nexus between good governance and participatory communication and identifies approaches towards participatory communication in rural Matatiele. From an interpretivism paradigm, the study employed a qualitative research method that permit a focused examination of nineteen purposively selected participants. Data retrieved from the semi-structured interview and from secondary sources was analysed thematically and narratively. Findings indicate that participatory communication is not uniformly applied across all areas within MLM jurisdiction. Infrastructure deficits, service delivery challenges and issues related to decentralisation are also identified. The study concludes that traditional authorities play a significant yet overlooked role in democratic development at the local level. Recommendations include an emphasis on the reassessment of the role citizens play in the decision-making process to enhance their meaningful involvement and empowerment in the governance process beyond participation by consultation. Therefore, participatory communication practices beyond establishing clear feedback mechanisms, enhancing responsiveness to community concerns, and improving citizens' influence on final decisions can promote mutual understanding and cocreation of content that could enhance citizens' livelihoods.

### Keywords

participatory communication, sustainable rural livelihoods, good governance, local responsiveness

## 1 Introduction

Before South Africa transitioned to democracy, the citizens were excluded from decision-making to identify their needs, act and determine their development priorities. According to Lieberman (2022), decisions affecting their lives were made entirely by others, leaving them without a voice. However, with the adoption of the 1996 Constitution (Act 108 of 1996), South Africa fundamentally transformed its governance approach. This new model emphasised responsiveness, transparency and accountability, demanding that the government actively listen and respond to the development and needs of its citizens. Furthermore, the Constitution highlighted the importance of localised community participation. It mandated aligning existing administrative structures to prioritise grassroots involvement in policy development (Molale, 2019; Piper & Deacon, 2008). This shift prioritised participation to uplift the living standards of the poor and previously marginalised populations.

Participatory communication (PC) places focus on engaging people at every phase of a communication development project, contrasting with practices where projects are mostly executed with external assistance and beneficiaries play a passive role as recipients of the final product (Bénit-Gbaffou, 2008). This innovative approach lays the foundation for a theory centred on commitment, information and knowledge sharing, and trust in development projects. By prioritising people's participatory involvement, it unveils a realm where communities can shape their destinies, addressing their distinct needs, devising solutions and effecting desired changes. South Africa's governance model decentralises power, assigning municipalities as the primary drivers of economic and social development at the local level. This structure aims to strengthen the participatory process to achieve sustainable outcomes (Molale, 2019; Tshabalala & Lombard, 2009; Dlamini & Reddy, 2018). Municipalities must, therefore, prioritise participatory communication strategies to guide development initiatives. This approach allows for direct community input and stimulates transparency and accountability to ensure projects align with local needs.

Limited participation in public service delivery plagues rural communities like Matatiele, stemming from several crucial issues. The core obstacle is related to social governance breakdowns including communication inefficiencies, unclear boundaries, slow service delivery and lack of responsiveness (Mubangizi, 2019; Ntombana & Khowa, 2020; Mubangizi, 2010). Despite its importance, rural communities frequently face barriers to meaningful participation in the programs that directly affect them. To counteract this exclusion, various participatory practices emerge. Integrated Development Planning (IDP) sessions, outreaches, community gatherings and ward meetings aim to bridge the gap by engaging communities to enhance their livelihoods (Maphazi et al., 2013; Mbuyisa, 2013). Engaging the public in decision-making processes is considered crucial for fostering transparent and accountable governance according to Gorwa (2019). However, implementing successful public participation initiative engagements hinges on several key factors. These include utilising effective communication strategies, addressing financial constraints, as well as ensuring both the willingness and ability of individuals to participate. Public willingness to participate is challenged with language discrepancies, geographic remoteness and limitations in resources (Horan, 2019). Some individuals may be able but unwilling to participate due to disinterest in politics, priorities on other commitments, distrust in the government's consideration of their input and perceived lack of personal gain.

Despite the legislative frameworks, achieving effective and meaningful community participation in IDP processes remains a significant challenge for municipalities. According

to Molale (2019), local government participation practices often suffer from a lack of public accountability, imbalanced power dynamics between officials and citizens, and cases of self-serving behaviour that lead to conflicts. In addition, there are tendencies for municipalities to expect passive endorsement of government plans from the public with no genuine engagement. This communication issue relates to the perception of community participation as a one-way dissemination of information about pre-determined plans. Molale (2019) further indicated that there is no evidence of community empowerment and involvement in decision-making and project implementation. Additionally, actual practices in IDP processes are non-participatory and disempowering. Like many other rural municipalities, Matatiele experiences challenges in delivering public services due to the constrained capacity of its government agencies and issues in social governance (Makalela & Asha, 2019). This lack of service quality has led to public dissatisfaction, prompting residents to express their grievances through protests and strikes. Additionally, an information unevenness exists, where citizens lack access to comprehensive information, while public officials often face limitations in both accessing and disseminating information effectively (Matyana & Mthethwa, 2022; Ntombana & Khowa, 2020). This study explores the practicability of participatory communication in a selected rural municipality. It identifies the diverse modes of communication and the community's perception of the effectiveness of the municipality's efforts at realising participatory communication towards citizens' engagement and empowerment.

## **2 Conceptualising participatory communication**

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), communication in development is characterised as a social process with the objective of establishing an authentic and enduring dialogue among stakeholders to achieve mutual success (Servaes & Servaes, 2021). In the realm of development, communication serves as a catalyst for social change and progress, playing a crucial role in fostering collaboration among individuals (Adeola, 2022). Communication holds various essential roles in development efforts, facilitating meaningful engagement between change proponents and the local populace, understanding their context and tailoring interventions based on local realities. Communication strategies contribute to enhanced collaboration and coordination in projects and fosters teamwork. Enabling individuals to communicate at all levels empowers them to identify crucial issues, find common ground for action and cultivate a sense of identity and participation necessary for decision-making (Gebeyehu & Jira, 2023).

Participatory communication has evolved within the field of development communication to emphasise a people-centred approach that involves the active participation of community members in decision-making processes. This approach emerged in 1970 as a critical response to the limitations of earlier development communication paradigms such as the dependency and modernisation paradigms (such as the Latin American School and Bretton Woods School) that were criticised for employing a top-down approach and neglecting the needs and voices of local community. Participatory communication, inspired by other schools (such as the Post-Freire School and Los Banos School), emphasises participation for empowerment and liberation, and communication for rural development with the importance of local knowledge and participation. This approach fosters a bottom-up approach that recognises that sustainable development requires the involvement of the people it aims to benefit. However, challenges

remain in how to ensure participation is inclusive and integrate technology in resource-limited contexts (Manyozo, 2006; Daya, 2019).

Critics argue that participatory communication's emphasis on idealistic and inclusive dialogue overlooks the complexities and power dynamics that are inherent in real-world contexts. This critique is rooted in the many participatory communication implementations, which reflect a top-down perspective where specific role-players control development processes. This approach contradicts the Latin American school's view of consensus-building engagement. Several scholars have sought to rescue participatory communication from criticisms by suggesting more grounded theoretical foundations. Critical theory provides a valuable lens for these efforts by emphasising the importance of reflexivity, power dynamics and social structures in communication processes. Chitnis (2005) advocates for a reflexive approach that acknowledges that complete equality is often unattainable in participatory communication, but to enhance participatory communication's effectiveness, greater inclusivity and responsiveness to local contexts must be established. Waldt (2014) suggests the adoption of more dialogical models that emphasise ongoing two-way communication rather than one-off participatory events. This aligns with Freire's notion of using dialogue to empower marginalised groups and ensure communication that fosters genuine understanding and collaboration. Also, Otto and Fourie (2009; 2016) propose the integration of critical pedagogy into participatory communication, which involves educating communities about the broader social and political contexts to enable more meaningful participation. This approach, therefore, moves beyond superficial participation to promoting deep, transformative engagement. Molale (2019) provides empirical evidence for the theoretical foundations through case studies to demonstrate successful participatory communication interventions. The studies highlight the importance of adapting participatory communication to specific cultural and social contexts with a focus on capacity building and local leadership to overcome practical challenges. Molale stresses the need to be flexible and avoid rigid adherence to idealistic principles that could hinder the effectiveness of participatory communication. The debate over participatory communication is usually centres on its conceptualisation as either an instrumental action or a dialogic engagement. Proponents of the Latin America school advocate for participatory communication as a dialogic engagement that empowers collective action. In contrast, critics (Carpentier, 2012; Carpentier, 2018) argue for a more pragmatic approach that integrates both perspectives with participation as a means for administration actions and for grassroots engagement.

Raelin (2012) describes participatory communication as a dialogical approach that is focused on two-way communication and exchanging information, perspectives and ideas to empower stakeholders. It transcends mere information exchange; it involves actively exploring and creating new insights to address improvement needs. Although commonly linked with community-driven development, participatory communication is applicable at any decision-making level, irrespective of the involved group diversity. PC revolves around prioritising the public, identifying community needs, fostering self-reliance and community involvement that encourages dialogue, embraces numerous issues and leads to a mutual understanding (Melkote & Steeves, 2015). PC facilitates a more inclusive approach to detect specific problems and afterwards formulate and execute a corresponding program for development purposes. This collaborative process allows for broader dissemination of knowledge and fosters the exchange of ideas across all societal levels (Zikargae et al., 2022).

This study supports that participatory communication is a people-centred approach that addresses the diverse needs of identifying community needs, engaging the community, fostering self-reliance, facilitating dialogue, allowing both communicators adequate space and

time, and ultimately leading to shared understanding. Genuine participatory communication requires considerable public involvement in shaping the discourse itself (Gebeyehu & Jira, 2023). South Africa's local governance framework enshrines participatory principles, drawing inspiration from the Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) and the Municipal Systems Act (2000). These foundational documents stress democratic governance and community engagement, encouraging stakeholders to contribute from the earliest stages of development initiatives to secure broader buy-in. Indeed, effective participation fosters ownership and strengthens sustainability. Genuine participatory communication requires inclusive interaction among all affected parties throughout the entirety of a project (Servaes & Servaes, 2021).

Van Ruler (2020) underscores the shift towards a fundamentally two-way, interactive and participatory nature of communication. In this framework, information dissemination is based on identified needs rather than attempting to create a need. Participatory communication prioritises cultural identity and seeks democratised participation at every stage. Communities become the focal point for discussions on living conditions and interactions with other communities (Mbuyisa, 2013). When used effectively, participatory communication within decision-making processes yields benefits like commitment, transparent information, shared knowledge, positive attitudes and trust. It fosters a mindset shift that combats harmful stereotypes and promotes understanding across a diverse populace, upholding dignity and equality (Gebeyehu & Jira, 2023). Balancing inclusiveness involves considering stakeholders' resources, interests, knowledge, and time. While stakeholders might not be burdened with intricate implementation details, it is vital to include their voices in decision-making that concerns them. The priority lies in ensuring stakeholders' input is heard during deliberations about the themes of a campaign and its implementation strategies (Mbuyisa, 2013).

## 2.1 Theoretical framework

This study is underpinned by the critical theory, which challenges political and social inequalities and encourages social transformation. Notably, the research builds upon the principle of empowerment, where citizens are not merely passive recipients of information but actively participate in the decision-making process (Myeni & Mvuyana, 2018). This aligns with the study's exploration, which ultimately aims to enhance citizen engagement and influence local governance. Empirical studies (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2000; Rasila & Mudau, 2013) demonstrate how participatory approaches grounded in critical theory can empower marginalised communities and foster social change. In Matatiele, studies suggest that limited participation exists, potentially reflecting the legacy of past authoritarian regimes and highlighting the need for critical engagement to empower citizens and challenge inequalities in local governance.

The sustainable livelihood framework emphasises the importance of diverse assets (financial, social, human, natural and physical) for individuals and communities to meet their basic needs and achieve well-being. According to Gebeyehu & Jira (2023), participatory communication practices are crucial for sustainable development as they can uncover individuals' underlying views. It could help in the adaptation of people's opinions and acquisition of new skills and knowledge for improved source of living. Moreover, rural society could be mobilised for specific development programs through appropriate communication (Gebeyehu & Jira, 2023). Nelimarkka et al. (2014) opine that the goal of participatory communication is to move beyond information sharing to empowerment for citizens.

The study focuses on how participatory communication can contribute to the sustainable livelihoods in Matatiele, noting that when community members are involved, their needs are

better identified and met (Maphazi et al., 2013). Research by Ellis (2000) demonstrates the framework's effectiveness in assessing factors influencing livelihoods. With this framework, by exploring how communication methods impact service delivery, a crucial aspect of sustainable livelihoods is revealed. It is revealed that limited participation and a lack of feedback hinder the community's ability to address community needs effectively, potentially impacting their ability to achieve sustainable livelihoods (Myeni & Mvuyana, 2018).

The participatory approach and the sustainable livelihood framework exhibit a symbiotic relationship, underpinned by their mutual emphasis on empowering communities and augmenting resilience. The participatory approach prioritizes the engagement of local communities in the decision-making processes, thereby ensuring that development initiatives are meticulously aligned with their unique needs and contextual realities. This methodological orientation is congruent with the sustainable livelihood framework, which aims to enhance the well-being of communities by improving their access to resources, capabilities, and opportunities. Research conducted by Cavalleri et al. (2022) elucidates that participatory methodologies can substantially advance sustainable livelihoods through the promotion of community engagement and ownership over developmental initiatives. Such involvement guarantees that interventions are not only more pertinent but also sustainable, as they are firmly rooted in local contexts and indigenous knowledge (Cavalleri et al., 2022). Similarly, Odoom et al. (2022) demonstrate how participatory methodologies in agricultural development have resulted in superior resource management and heightened resilience among farming communities, which are critical elements of sustainable livelihoods. Furthermore, Mathetsa et al.'s investigation furnishes empirical evidence that participatory strategies can enhance resource management and environmental conservation, which are integral to sustainable livelihoods. By incorporating communities into the stewardship of natural resources, there exists an augmented probability of attaining enduring sustainability and resilience in the face of external pressures (Mathetsa et al., 2023). Specifically, as highlighted by Odoom et al. (2022), participatory communication mechanisms can bolster community resilience by cultivating social capital and fortifying networks. This aspect is vital within the sustainable livelihood framework, which underscores the significance of social assets in effectively navigating shocks and stresses.

Correspondingly, the participatory communication approach ensures that these assets and vulnerabilities are accurately identified and addressed through solutions that are community-driven (Peters et al., 2009). Therefore, engaging local community members in decision-making, planning and implementation makes the SLF more relevant and responsive to local needs. Furthermore, the participatory approach strengthens the sustainability of livelihood initiatives. When individuals are actively engaged in the design and execution of projects, they are likely to develop a sense of ownership over the process and its outcomes. This also fosters dedication and sustained efforts. Participatory approaches contribute to the development of social capital and trust within communities, which are essential for collective action and resilience against challenges and pressures (Gebeyehu & Jira, 2023; Peters et al., 2009). By employing both critical theory and the sustainable livelihoods framework, the study provides a multifaceted lens to examine participatory communication in Matatiele. Analysing communication practices within the context of South African rural communities offers valuable insights into the connection between these practices, citizen empowerment and, ultimately, the achievement of sustainable livelihoods in the rural South African context.

## 2.2 Participatory communication and good governance: The nexus

Good governance hinges on citizens actively participating in decisions that impact their lives, experiencing empowerment, and receiving respect for the rule of law and human rights. Core principles associated with good governance include the rule of law, legitimacy, respect for human rights, participation and accountability (Kelechi, 2019). While various definitions exist, the emphasis on good governance centres on realising fundamental values like democracy, human rights, the rule of law and social justice. It embodies the process through which decisions are made in societies or organisations, voices are allocated, participation is facilitated, and accountability is established. It aligns closely with democracy and emphasises citizens' central role in any effective governance system (Kelechi, 2019; Gisselquist, 2012). According to Kamei (2019), participatory communication is a dynamic, interactional and transformative process of dialogue between institutions, groups and individuals to seek solutions to common concerns. This reflects its role in the community and the nation's development. Mayekiso et al. (2013) emphasised that participation is vital for any democratic country to realise good governance.

The South African legislative framework specifically aims to integrate citizens into the core of policymaking, reflecting a deliberate approach. This approach emphasises that democracy extends beyond mere institutional design, procedures, and rules; it is an ongoing process in which citizens progressively exert greater control over decisions. Nevertheless, academic debates increasingly question whether participatory communication should be considered an indispensable mechanism for achieving democracy or simply a means to achieve other objectives (Maphazi et al., 2013; Sant, 2019; Mbuyisa, 2013).

Despite government recognition of the importance of participation, significant challenges remain. These include limited understanding of policy processes, resource scarcity, reliance on volunteers, poor representation of rural communities, strained relations between government and these communities, restricted access to information, and time and policy timeline constraints that require immediate attention. The South African Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) enshrines participation as a fundamental component of democracy, adopting a deliberative approach (Section 118). This provision clarifies that public participation in government matters is permitted, allowing the public and relevant institutions to exercise their constitutionally guaranteed rights to information and participation. Public participation, therefore, aims to ensure that stakeholders directly impacted by a public authority's decision have the right to be consulted and contribute to those decisions. The chosen theory of participation and the way the public participation process is communicated to participants are critical factors determining its success in the South African context (Maphazi et al., 2013; Mbuyisa, 2013).

## 2.3 Challenges and Opportunities in participatory communication: A rural South African Perspective

Participatory communication is challenged in guaranteeing an individual's level of participation and primary interest. It also faces difficulties in both informing citizens and encouraging their engagement if not well adopted (Akbar et al., 2021). Using communication tools ineffectively hinders information dissemination and renders the public insufficient, presenting a legislative hurdle. The process of implementing participatory communication is time-consuming and requires a significant level of finance and resources, which could hinder its proposed goal. Also, language and demographic barriers continue to make participatory communication a complex venture. Aside from institutional challenges like a lack of skilled participatory communicators,

the dearth of participatory communication could lead to misinformation and conflict (Chin, 2020; Kamei, 2019; Gebeyehu & Jira, 2023). A major barrier identified is the lack of readily available information regarding significant government activities. While communication serves as a valuable tool for promoting participation, navigating the complex and often contentious political landscape can be challenging (Akbar et al., 2021). Public communication regarding policy issues is frequently perceived as a one-way flow of information from politicians to the public, rather than a two-way dialogue (Arwidson, 2020) between the legislature and the public.

The manner of communication significantly impacts how seriously citizens consider calls for legislative participation. Effective communication and participation foster government responsiveness by enhancing citizens' understanding of their rights and empowering them to engage in public discourse. Additionally, it improves government performance by providing citizens with direct information and equipping them to hold the government accountable (Kamei, 2019; Chin, 2020; Gebeyehu & Jira, 2023). Participatory communication fosters social capital by facilitating the creation of networks and social movements centred around specific issues. It is considered essential for good governance as it impacts all aspects (Capability, Responsiveness and Accountability) of the DFID framework, playing a critical role in promoting citizen capacity to identify their needs, articulate them clearly and evaluate government's performance (Molale & Fourie, 2023).

Participatory communication emphasises active citizen involvement at all stages of project development (Molale, 2019). The participatory communication approach advocates for information sharing, commitment and trust, leading to more successful development projects. Molale and Fourie (2023) argue that community involvement empowers individuals to take ownership of their development, identify their unique needs, and devise solutions that reflect preferences, ultimately leading to self-empowerment and positive change. Molale and Fourie (2023) assert that communication tools and their effective utilisation are key to maximising public participation in the South African legislative context. Olorunnisola et al. (2020) and Twinomurinzi et al. (2012) argue that while younger generations favour modern technologies, like different social media platforms, the government lag behind in adopting them, creating a significant accessibility barrier for rural communities with limited infrastructure.

### **3 Research study site and methodology**

The research investigation took place within the rural confines of Mafube, located under the jurisdiction of the Matatiele Local Municipality (MLM), situated within the Alfred Nzo District Municipality. Matatiele has a population of approximately 203, 843, with 10 deeply rural areas. The majority of the village inhabitants fall between 18 and 64 years old, with a female population of 55% female and a male population of 45% (Stats SA Census, 2011). Economically, MLM primarily focuses on agriculture and commerce. The region is predominantly rural, characterised by scattered rural settlements and subsistence farming practices. Mafube was selected as the study's focal point due to its distinctive nature: it remains largely undeveloped compared to the surrounding townships and is governed by a traditional ruler authority. Like many South African rural municipalities, Mafube has witnessed a demographic shift marked by an increase in its under-18 population and a decline in residents over the age of 18. The shift is attributed to a surge in teenage pregnancy and migration to urban areas for education and employment (MLM IDP, 2018). In Mafube village, the local authorities prefer addressing issues through community gatherings to mitigate disruptions. The area, known as the Mafube mission is characterised by

Catholic schools, residential areas, churches and facilities associated with providing peaceful services rooted in faith.

This study used a qualitative method within an interpretivist paradigm, perceiving reality as socially constructed. Recognising that exploring the effectiveness of participatory communication processes in MLM necessitated a profound comprehension of the citizens and administrators' perception of forms of participatory communication employed. The qualitative case study strategy was used as an apt approach that focuses on the lived experiences of the citizens. The study gathered data from both secondary sources and semi-structured interviews to glean insights on the communication models to deliver service delivery in the rural community. Interviews were employed as the primary research technique to gain a deeper understanding of communication models suitable for rural municipalities. Research respondents were purposively selected to include municipal employees from the IDP and communications units. The selection criteria were based on identifying respondents involved in the development of IDP outreaches and knowledgeable about the communication Strategy 2016/2021.

The target population comprise rural residents with the ability to address the study's central questions and who have been personally impacted by the issues relating to community involvement. A purposive sampling strategy was used, selecting community members and amakhosi (chiefs) for their extensive local knowledge. Ward committee members, holding dual roles as municipal employees and political leaders within the community, also participated in the study. 19 informants were selected, taking into account demographics. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 55 and had lived in Matatiele for a minimum of 10 years with permanent residency. The participants include 15 community members, 1 village head (Amakhosi/tribal authority member), 1 ward committee member, and 2 municipal employees overseeing communications and IDP directorates. Permission was obtained from gatekeepers, namely MLM and Community heads (chiefs) to ensure ethical conduct.

## **4 Findings and Discussion**

The findings revealed the respondents' perspectives, experiences, and assessments on existing communication practices that seeks to promote participatory communication in MLM.

### **4.1 Communication modes within the Municipality and its challenges**

This analysis explores how the municipality disseminates information to community members. Findings reveal that community gatherings, often referred to as imbizo are the most prevalent communication method, followed by ward meetings facilitated by designated ward committees. Notably, only 30% of respondents mentioned public participation platforms such as the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) as a source of information. In addition, the study highlights the continued use of traditional communication channels, primarily ward meetings and community gatherings organised by local leaders (amakhosi). This aligns with the observation of Fourie and Van der Waldt (2021), who emphasise the role of traditional communication methods such as word-of-mouth and meetings in information dissemination. This finding suggests a persistent reliance on word-of-mouth communication within the municipality. Participants who are community members expressed trust in the ward committee and amakhosi. One of the community members noted that: "I trust the Amakhosi or anyone from the ward committee to relay information to me. Just that often time the Amakhosi claim not to have vital information."

One of the traditional chiefs expressed community members' sentiments of feeling used by the municipality during elections, alleging that officials prioritised self-interest and withheld vital information. The traditional leader emphasised the discrepancy between promises made during elections and subsequent disappearances. The limited experience of participatory communication among community members was predominantly confined to public gatherings (*izimbizo*).

The findings reveal different communication activities employed within the municipality to engage with its populace.

#### **4.1.1 Direct Interactions/ meetings**

These occur quarterly through the public participation and communication units, using the speaker and mayor's office, to facilitate the dissemination of government information, encourage public participation and provide public education. The 'talk to your councillor' program, for instance, was introduced to enable direct interaction between councillors and constituents to address concerns (State of the Ward Address) promptly. Although some of the participants agree that this medium allows for participation and feedback, it was observed that conflict may arise if the audience is dissatisfied with the disseminated information.

Some community members observed that NGOs sometimes organise interventions as independent organisations. However, information available to them and disseminated to the community is limited and sometimes imposed. In addition, issues of the absence of immediate feedback were raised about meeting with the chiefs or traditional leaders. According to Mamokhere and Meyer (2022), public meetings are not always prioritised, and the medium does not guarantee the communities' involvement in governance.

#### **4.1.2 Roadshow Program/ IDP Community Outreach**

This is held biannually to present and assess current projects, service delivery backlogs, wards' progress, and infrastructure needs priorities by each ward. While such methods facilitate public input before the IDP document and Budget are adopted, exploring alternative and potentially more comprehensive communication strategies might be beneficial. It was noted that roadshows are not frequent and, therefore, not reliable as a platform for prompt action. Fourie and Van der Waldt (2021) also attest to roadshows as a mechanism employed for local community engagement.

#### **4.1.3 Community Radio**

Through a partnership with two local radio stations, the municipality communicates twice a week, using dedicated time slots for municipal message drivers to share information, educate the public and create awareness. Mamokhere and Meyer (2022) referenced the use of community radio in facilitating participatory communication in the IDP process, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, three community members noted that the elderly listened more to radio programs aside from entertainment that is enjoyed by the youth. Regardless of its advantages of reaching a large audience, there are chances of misinformation, varying preferences of participants.

#### 4.1.4 Local Newspaper

Advertorials are published monthly in community newspapers to convey messages, annual reports, municipal budgets, public notices and vacancies. Newspapers are one of the platforms for participating in the IDP process but for principally used for sharing information (Fourie & Van der Waldt, 2021). Although, this communication strategy is considered easily accessible, the preference for other native languages aside from English language, which is often used and the deficient avenue for community input and feedback are its limitations.

#### 4.1.5 Social media

The municipality actively uses Facebook to engage with the young population, reaching over 13,000 followers. This platform is used to post updates on job opportunities and municipal events. According to Adeola (2022), calls for inclusive development are driven by ongoing technological innovation, globalisation and the adoption of social media platforms. The findings from Fourie & Van der Waldt (2021) reveal that social media is perceived as the least effective participatory communication mode.

#### 4.1.6 Pamphlets/ Posters

Simplified information sheets in three languages (English, Sesotho and Isixhosa) are distributed through various channels, including local churches post office boxes, taxi or bus ranks, ward offices, retail shops, and tribal authorities' offices. This mode is effective in disseminating information but falls short in actively involving communities or eliciting their feedback during the important stages of the IDP (Fourie & Van der Waldt, 2021). Moreover, some of the participants noted that they easily discard the pamphlets and dispose them without reading.

#### 4.1.7 Loud Hailing

Traditional communication methods, including loud hailing, are employed in rural areas to effectively reach all villages (Fourie & Van der Waldt, 2021). This was more effective especially during lockdown when gathering was restricted. However, it was noted as a channel to pass information and not effective for feedback.

Regarding demographic factors, a respondent acknowledged the municipality's awareness of diverse communication methods tailored to citizens based on demographics, considering factors like literacy levels. One of the participants emphasised that:

I can say the municipality tries to be committed to having communication that is participatory through measures like attendance registers at community outreach meetings. Public education engagements, such as community dialogues, are a way to educate citizens about the importance of participating in government programs and provide feedback on raised issues. Notably, Facebook serves as a significant platform for feedback so that we are aware of matters affecting our daily lives. (Community member)

Perspectives from the given extract raises questions on efforts at involving the community in IDP forums and its translation to their active participation in decision-making. This suggests a

possible feeling of marginalisation of some community members when the ward councillor is, for instance, viewed as having significant authority in the IDP process. This could resultantly cause discomfort and highlight power dynamics and key role players in the IDP process that confirm that citizens' participation may not necessarily guarantee their active participation in decision-making processes. Therefore, citizens' power in decision-making can be limited to dialogic opportunities for community input.

### **5 The effectiveness of employed participatory communication modes on governance: Municipality's perspectives**

Approximately 80% of the participants, when assessing the impact of IDP outreaches, mentioned its role in fostering good governance within communities. It was noted the IDP helped raise awareness about the municipality's plans and provided a platform for submitting their community's needs. However, a concerning number of participants expressed a lack of awareness regarding their participatory rights within the IDP process.

Some of the community members note the absence of participation in many of the organised meetings and attributed the limited participation during IDP outreaches to a lack of understanding and insufficient feedback from the municipality. They noted delays or non-execution of requested changes without adequate communication. Ward committees were perceived as undervalued compared to other government structures. Lack of feedback and progress on proposed changes led to scepticism among community members, who often learned about new developments through word of mouth.

Inquiries about the contribution of participatory communication on service delivery reveal an acknowledgment that participatory communication, if effectively implemented, plays a substantial role in enhancing service delivery. This perception aligns with the White Paper on Local Government (1998) adoption of an integrated approach to planning municipal services. Some of the community members expressed willingness to engage in the planning and development processes to improve their community's well-being. However, participants raised concerns about low participation during IDP outreaches and inadequate communication between the municipality and the community. Participants attributed these issues to a lack of knowledge, limited feedback, late feedback or no information from the municipality. Ward committees were identified as reliable sources during such engagements, although they felt undervalued, especially during IDP processes. The municipality's failure to provide timely feedback on requested or presented information contributed to a perception of neglect and self-interest. Participants also noted a lack of awareness regarding new developments or projects within the community, except sometimes through verbalised conversations with community members on an informal basis. This suggests a possible disconnect between the municipality officials and some of the community members. Bogopane's (2012) qualitative study on democratic participatory development cautions against excluding community members from crucial activities including project planning, execution and monitoring, to capture the community's yearnings. According to the study, improving democratic participatory development highlights accountability, sustainability and positive outcomes.

Interviews with employees from the IDP and the communication unit highlighted the IDP process's role in guiding municipal management decisions. While the municipality employs its communication methods, reaching all individuals is hindered by factors like infrastructure limitations, tokenism and demographics. However, as mandated by Legislation,

the municipality conducts consultation sessions with stakeholders (both internal and external) to establish effective communication objectives. The municipality undertakes annual reviews of its five-year communication strategy to evaluate performance, assess progress on objectives, gauge effectiveness, examine external perceptions and addressing identified shortcomings (Communication Channels Strategy 2016/2021 for MLM in Alfred Nzo District, 2016).

The head of communications development emphasised the municipality's commitment to providing platforms for voicing complaints and concerns through its five-year communication strategy, action plan, and ward stakeholder engagement. Recognising communication as fundamental to government work and effectiveness, the municipality aims to keep the public informed about developments in their areas. MLM takes responsibility for regular communication to prevent uninformed citizens, and reduce the likelihood of service delivery protests.

Given the recurring community protests during election years, the municipality appears deficient in effective participatory communication. Protests are staged due to non-functional ward structures or communities' dissatisfaction with services received from the municipality or the national government. This finding aligns with a communication environmental scan conducted by the municipality, which revealed a general perception of the government and the municipality's failure to deliver essential services, leading to suspicions of corruption. To counter these public perceptions, the municipality has proactively initiated efforts to strengthen public education and community consultation programs across its 26 wards.

A participant noted that: "People do not always participate in meetings. Only about 30% are present at meetings due to a lack of empowerment and education among rural residents. This hinders their confidence to raise their points in front of a sizable audience." (Community member)

Acknowledging public concerns, the municipality is enhancing its public education and consultation initiatives across the wards. This suggests that the perception of participation is limited to citizens' consultation and dialogue, and does not completely embrace citizens' empowerment.

## **6 Preferred approaches for promoting participatory communication in delivering services towards sustainable livelihood**

### **6.1 Collaboration with role players and municipal stakeholders**

Participants highlighted the implementation of a communication approach in the municipality to actively contribute to encouraging citizen involvement in service delivery. A municipal employee explained that "the municipality uses a communication strategy that is the 'war room', which has diverse professionals that ensures community development across the wards." This implies that various departments collaboratively strive to enhance service delivery comprehensively, with established communication channels that reach out to local communities. This aligns with the perspectives of Mubangizi (2021; 2022), who defines public participation as encompassing various methods for groups and individuals to express their concerns about public matters.

The second municipal employee noted that the municipality employs different strategies to engage with local communities within the framework of public participation. He noted that "despite having a framework, a dedicated public participation unit goes beyond and uses tools such as social media, councillors, internal publications, clustering of wards and traditional authorities." Such an approach underscores the importance of partnership with key

stakeholders to ensure comprehensive representation in public engagement processes. The local municipality also plays a role in fostering economic development through business initiatives. Multiple participants acknowledged the importance of traditional leadership in enhancing participation. A community member mentioned that: “engagement with traditional leadership aids in community gathering” is a common practice in Mafube, where traditional rulers are valued for their leadership and wisdom in the community.

## **6.2 Roadshows strategy**

Roadshows are widely acknowledged by the municipality as an effective tool to improve service delivery through participatory communication. However, some participants noted that roadshows are not consistently conducted, necessitating the exploration of other approaches such as engagement through local newspapers, the use of ward committees with respect to the Municipal Structures Act, allocated radio slots and various printed media-like brochures and newsletters, to enhance public participation. A participant emphasised that although roadshows play a role in educating individuals about their rights to participate in public processes, the absence of community involvement in the IDP process continues to hinder the effectiveness of diverse communication strategies. This aligns with studies (Mamokhere, 2022; Mamokhere & Meyer, 2022) that identify a lack of resources, uncertainties about input validation, lack of information dissemination and other hindrances to effective IDP processes. A municipal employee highlighted the values of roadshows, emphasising their role in gathering information to address the community’s needs and to enhance service delivery.

## **6.3 Ward Committees’ system**

The structure of ward committees is recognised for its inclusive approach at the local level. Participants affirmed the functionality and operation of ward committees within the MLM. With 26 wards in the municipality, each ward hosts 10 ward committees, making ward committees the predominant communication structure. A municipal employee highlighted the committees’ role in providing feedback on ward-level issues and government operations, particularly those related to service delivery.

This aligns with the perspective of Mayekiso et al. (2013) who posit that ward-based planning equips committees with a structured approach to fulfilling their responsibilities within the municipality. Implementing the ward committee system aligns with the municipality’s commitment to upholding democratic principles of public participation as outlined in the Constitution and the Municipal Structure Act. However, a community member observed that the ward committee needs to be strengthened, well-informed and empowered. This corroborates with the emphasis by Mayekiso et al. (2013) that ward committees need to be nurtured and strengthened to effectively influence the policy-making process. This echoes the essentiality of citizens’ empowerment for realistic participatory communication (Fadipe & Molale, 2024). Another community member stated that ward committees, representing various sectors, collaborate with the municipality through district and provincial government and provide the platform for public participation and for the municipality to consult with the people.

Some community members observed that the ward committees address local service delivery by appropriating responses to community needs related to electricity or water. They collaborate with community-based organisations like clinics, NGOs and schools to enhance social services and service delivery.

## 7 Conclusion

This study illustrates the profound significance of participatory communication on local governance. It considered the strategies for promoting participatory communication processes for improved service delivery to foster sustainable livelihoods. Participation encompasses a variety of involvement that ranges from passive information sharing, (where citizens are merely informed about decisions) to consultative participation (which allows feedback but maintains external control), and empowered participation (which grants citizens equal decision-making power). Indeed, active participation is an interactive process that unfolds continuously and could be through strategic planning. It thrives on open dialogue and promotes collaboration and shared responsibility among stakeholders in decision-making. Therefore, while participation refers to the involvement of individuals or communities in various stages of development programs through their local insights and indigenous knowledge, participatory communication prioritises dialogue and empowerment and ensures that all voices are valued in the decision-making process. It underscores two-way communication and collaboration that empowers the citizens to influence outcomes directly.

While the studied municipality (MLM) demonstrated the potential of this approach, it fell short of fully realising the potential of implementing it. The Municipal's efforts suggest a continuing commitment to developing citizen participation in the IDP formulation. Despite various mechanisms established by municipalities to encourage community participation in the IDP process, the study revealed limitations, particularly regarding the influence of marginalised rural-based citizens. The municipal communication strategy's effectiveness was evaluated through responses received during IDP outreaches and the opportunities for citizens to comment and provide input before the adoption of the IDP document and Budget.

Despite identified challenges, the IDP process utilising participatory communication yielded positive outcomes, including increased accessibility to government, mechanisms for holding them accountable, and some degree of stakeholders' influence. However, low public engagement and limited real power to impact decisions through the participatory approach used in the IDP process highlight the need for strengthening public participation efforts within the MLM.

The study concludes that a participatory communication approach that is citizen-centric is a pivotal tool for rural community development and the realisation of sustainable livelihoods through effective service delivery. The nature of communication channels in participatory communication should align with basic participatory principle of citizens' empowerment and be attuned to community needs.

## 8 Recommendations

This section outlines key recommendations to strengthen participatory communication and focus on crucial aspects to enhance the IDP process.

### 8.1 Education and empowerment for all

The municipality needs to educate citizens and officials about participatory communication, to provide a clear understanding of everyone's roles in local governance. This shared understanding will pave the way for wilful and meaningful public participation. This will also

help in identifying, developing and implementing effective structures and communication channels that resonate with diverse demographics in the community.

### **8.2 Addressing challenges with ward committees**

Strengthening the voice of communities is as important as strengthening the role of ward committees as channels for community input. This can involve capacity building for committee members and ensuring their concerns are effectively conveyed during the IDP process.

### **8.3 Intentional promotion of participation from all stakeholders**

It is important to recognise the multifaceted realities of community residents and accommodate their diverse needs. The municipality needs to establish participation mechanisms that are inclusive and accessible to all. This requires tailoring communication methods and addressing existing disparities to ensure no one is excluded. To address the underrepresentation of marginalised groups, partnerships with NGOs are considered an enabling platform to encourage meaningful participation and counter any bias towards specific interests.

### **8.4 Resolute municipal's commitment**

Active involvement of community members should be encouraged in shaping decisions that impact their lives. Moreover, citizens' participation should not be limited to identifying issues but in all stages of problem-solving. This fosters a sense of ownership and accountability, leading to more sustainable solutions. Therefore, respecting community input and demonstrating a genuine commitment to participatory communication are essential. This can be achieved through collaborations with communities within the IDP process. The co-development of a comprehensive strategy with various stakeholders, including NGOs, faith-based organisations, and traditional leaders in the community, will enhance service provision with participatory communication as a key facilitating factor. Collaborative planning should be encouraged during budget planning to foster transparency in decision-making.

By implementing these recommendations, Matatiele can significantly participatory communication and its effectiveness, leading to improved service delivery and enhanced livelihoods for the rural residents.

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