Language as a Communication Tool for Maximum Participation in Municipalities: Lessons from Moqhaka Local Municipality, South Africa

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Abstract

This study attempts to accent the momentousness of public participation as an essential element of successful good local governance in the Republic of South Africa. Public participation is a fundamental dimension of democracy and an important factor in the deepening of democratic process. In this study, a total of 283 literate and semi-literate residents from the Moqhaka Local Municipality (comprising Kroonstad, Viljoenskroon and Steynsrus) participated in a purposive non-probability sampling exercise. Questionnaires were given to respondents following the population sizes, where Kroonstad (150 respondents) being the largest, followed by Viljoenskroon (80 respondents), and lastly, Steynsrus (53 respondents). The results showed overwhelmingly that both literate and semi-literate members of the Municipality strongly suggest that the use of African languages, in this case Sesotho is crucial for democracy to thrive.

This paper intended to revitalise and encourage public participation at South African local municipalities, and to help minimise protest actions where residents constantly demand better service delivery. This has been true with the low voter turnout rate during the November 2021 local government elections. Local municipalities in South Africa are facing a huge task of advocating the involvement of communities and community organisations in local government. Language of communication is thus important in achieving this.

Keywords: African languages, participation, democracy, municipalities, service delivery

1. Introduction

South African Constitution post-apartheid, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996), makes provision for community participation at all government spheres, inclusive of local municipalities. Jayal (2001) defines public participation as the involvement of the public in affairs, planning, governance, and overall development programmes at the grassroots level. On the other hand, Pacione (2019) defined public participation as a political principle and practice that aims to engage and enable the involvement of individuals who may have an interest in a particular decision that impacts them. Mkhize and Mutereko (2022) posited that the level of participation of relevant stakeholders must be high and consistent across all communities in South Africa. Equally so, Section 25 of the Local Government Municipal Systems Act,2000 (Act 32 0f 2000) indicates that all municipalities should adopt a single, inclusive, and strategic plan, Integrated Development Plan (IDP) to promote areas development under its jurisdiction. Therefore, IDP was adopted as an instrument to ensure that municipalities collaborate with communities and other government agencies to promote sustainable service delivery. Therefore, public participation has become an integral part of democratic practice. Moreover, Burns *et al* (2004) postulated that public participation conglomerates the contribution of individuals and communities in decisions about matters that affect their lives. Thus, communities are to play a determined role and have a significant degree of power and influence. Shipley & Utz (2012) posited that public participation is becoming an expectation in government policy and planning decisions. This expectation serves as a commitment by government to enter dialogue with residents, creating forms of participatory governance, as well as inclusive public participation. The public no longer see public participation as an opportunity, but they expect to play a role in government policy and decision-making.

The Municipal Structures Act, No. 117 of 1998, Chapter 4, Subsections (g) and (h) state that the local municipality mayors are annually to report on the involvement of communities in the affairs of the local municipalities and ensure that due regard is given to public views, as well as the effect of consultation on the council decisions. Patten (2001) postulated that the notion of democratic public participation is commendable for both ideological and pragmatic reasons. Public participation is minimally seen by residents, and this is proven by many service delivery protests over poor service

delivery rendered to them. Public participation aims to reduce or minimise protests by residents, and to promote fruitful engagements between residents and local municipalities in South Africa. Involvement through community participation plays a critical role in ensuring that exact service delivery needs and desires are met.

Statement of the problem

To date in the Republic of South Africa, public participation has been reduced to a cumbersome ritual, a necessary appendix required by various laws and policies operating at the local government level. Public protests for service delivery in South Africa look like a daily occurrence, largely because of lack or not enough public participation. Government buildings (such as community clinics or halls) are burnt down during public protests, and public amenities and at times lives have been lost in the process of the public trying to convey their views and feelings to the government. It appears as if the bureaucratic elites of officials and municipal councillors are determined to exploit their truncated version and understanding of public participation. Language, particularly the African languages, as an important element in public participation seems to be condemned to a low level in the hearts and minds of South Africans, especially by those who hold senior positions in government. No wonder then that political partying is everything, and the constituency appears to be nothing (except every five years when electorates are expected to vote, then electorates are everything). This notion raises unfairly the position of "so-called" party-based glorification over the constituency-based democracy. The reality of the situation is, however, that real public participation could minimise public protests for service delivery in South Africa. Despite Constitutional objectives, local municipalities have failed to fulfil the spelled-out Constitutional aims and objectives on public participation. This research hopes to reverse this unfortunate situation where only the English language is regarded as more important than all the other official languages in the Republic of South Africa, especially in facilitating public participation in the local public administration.

Research paradigm

The research paradigm is defined by Bitzer (2017) as an ideology or lens that is conditioned to evaluate reality. In this study, the critical research paradigm has been followed. The current situation in Moqhaka Local Municipality has been shaped by circumstances such as politics, gender, religion, and culture that interact with one another, from the past dispensation in South Africa. The purpose of the researchers is not only to explain the situation, but to transform it for the benefit of those who are unable to speak English, and consequently being deprived of giving their voice and contribution towards the improvement of the running of the municipality.

Research objectives

Given the situation discussed above, this study seeks to address the challenge faced by municipalities, especially in the current democratic dispensation in the Republic of South Africa, where twelve languages, ten of which were historically disadvantaged, are recognised as official languages. This study attempted to answer the following key research questions:

1. Is public participation in local municipality done successfully or a mere Constitutional requirement, especially with regards to issues of language use and respect?

2. In your ward council meetings, do you (the public) participate or interact with your ward councillor about matters affecting you, such as a language of communication? Also, what language needs to be used?

Review of related literature

Bellamy (2012:1) posited that public participation plays a critical role in a democratic country. Municipal Structures Act, No. 117 of 1998, Section 73 provides for the establishment of ward committees to enhance participatory democracy in local government. Theron & Mchunu (2013:106) are of the view that ward committees ideally create a bridge between the public, political, and administrative structures of local municipalities. Without ward committees, these structures (public, political, and administrative) are surely going to fail. Ankersmit (1997:21) strongly states that public participation serves as a framework of constitutional restraints designed to allow all residents to enjoy individual and collective rights, including, but not limited to freedom of speech and religion. Furthermore, Mnisi and Selelo (2021) posited that public participation circumscribes the active engagement of individuals in administrative operations and the process of decision-making through the inclusion of residents where all possible options remain open as well as the incorporation of public concerns.

Manjoo & Czapanskiy (2008:1) argued that public participation includes, but is not limited to inclusiveness, openness, access, consultation, shared decisions, and transparency. Shared decisions in this paper refer to public participation, where both the public and local municipality are to equally participate in the decision-making process in matters affecting the public. Verba (1999:240) contended that residents share information about themselves (who they are, what they want, and what they need) and put pressure on local municipality officials for a response. Dialectic interaction between public authority and the public might sometimes be required to identify relevant information to be requested. Equally so, active participation could be a prerequisite for access to information for the public. On the other hand, Manaf, Mahamed, and Lawton (2016) believed that the public participation process involves a reciprocal exchange of information and active

engagement, with the overarching objective of facilitating improved decision-making that is inclusive of the public.

Stein (2001:489) postulated that transparency by local municipalities is supported by facilitating access to information that enables the public to participate in public life and hold public authorities (municipal councillors) accountable. Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996) Chapter 7, stipulates that the objective of local government is to provide a democratic and accountable government for local communities to ensure the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner and to encourage the involvement of public and community organisations in matters of local government. Furthermore, Municipal Systems Act, 2000 (Act No. 32 of 2000) requires that local municipalities are to develop a culture of participation by the public and create mechanisms, processes, and procedures accordingly. Furthermore, Mamokhere *et al*. (2021) suggested that transparency and accountability should be practiced under law by public office-bearers, implying that politicians should be held accountable to the legislature, whilst councillors (as administrators) are to be accountable to the public.

Naidu (2008:83) mentioned that it would be a tragedy for democracy if the principles of public participation were to remain nothing more than words on paper and not translate into concrete and tangible participation that affects policy at all levels. The White Paper on Local Government (1998) provides for the establishment of public participation. Moreover, the Municipal Structures Act, 1998 (Act No. 117 of 1998) stipulates that local municipalities in performing their functions are required to develop mechanisms to consult with the public and community organisations. Respectfully, all spheres of government need to establish a healthy relationship of trust between themselves and the electorates they represent and serve. Within the *Batho Pele* Principles (People First Principles) which are: consultation, service standards, access, courtesy, information, openness and transparency, redress, and value for money, there are two (principles), namely courtesy and consultation which need to be the centre of planning and service delivery, specifically with the issue of the choice of language/s local municipality may decide to use. Local municipalities will be expected to decide on the choice of language/s to be used between themselves and the public, in consultation with the same public.

2. Methodology

The methodology for this study implies the methods which are intended to be used to collect data. Every stage (research design; research population; sample; research instruments; data collection and data analysis) will be explained and justified with reasons underpinning the choices adopted for the choice of a particular method and material. The mixed-method methodology has been deemed appropriate in this study because a quantitative as well as qualitative approach has been used jointly in this study. The questionnaire that is being used in this study has both closed and open-ended responses which are necessary for the researchers to gain a clearer picture, especially within the human science environment.

Research design

Yin (1989:29) mentioned that research design deals with logical rather than logistical problems. A logical problem in this study is that local municipalities in South Africa do not consult (participate) enough in most decision-making processes. This paper is focused on the decision regarding the use of indigenous African language/s when communicating with the public. The function of a research design is to ensure that the evidence obtained enables researchers to answer the research questions as unambiguously as possible. The evidence needed in this study is to determine what are the possible challenges faced by local municipalities in encouraging public participation.

Research Population

Salkind (2006:85) defines population as a group of potential participants to whom the results of the study could be generated. For this study, the population is 283 literate and semi-literate residents of the Moqhaka Local Municipality, from Kroonstad, Steynsrus and Viljoenskroon towns.

Sample

Salkind (2006:85) defined a sample as a group of potential participants to whom the results of the study could be generalised. Furthermore, Gelo *et al*. (2009) posited that a sample involves selecting a group of units that are representative of a population to draw conclusions that can be applied to the entire population. For this study, the sample will consist of 283 literate and semi-literate residents from the towns making up Moqhaka Local Municipality (Kroonstad, Steynsrus, and Viljoenskroon). The sample of 283 is compiled as follows: 150 residents (as respondents for the study) from Kroonstad, 80 residents from Viljoenskroon; and 53 residents from Steynsrus. This break-down is based on the sizes of these towns. Implying that Kroonstad is bigger than the two towns, and Viljoenskroon is also bigger than Steynsrus.

Sampling procedure

Leedey and Ormond (2005:198) defined sampling as a process whereby elements (participants) are selected from a population. A non-probability sampling will be used in sampling the respondents, wherein it involves the researcher's professional judgment in selecting units that represent the population. For this study, purposive non-probability sampling

was used, as it is usually a sampling with a specific plan in mind. The use of purposive non-probability sampling is justified by the fact that this study has a contributing factor and is specific in determining what language/s of communication local municipalities decide to use in communicating with the public.

Research instrument

Questionnaires were used to gather information. Questionnaires are helpful as they provide first-hand information to the study. As a result, the interaction between the researcher and respondents generates ideas mainly of mutual interest. Also, the questionnaire had questions where respondents were allowed to express their views regarding communication and the issue of languages within their municipality.

Data collection procedure

Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill (2000:279) are of the view that data collection is the way in which the researcher would be collecting data. Again, Burns and Grove (2005) postulated that data collection is seen as the precise, systematic gathering of information relevant to the research purpose or specific objectives, questions, or hypotheses of a study. For this study, questionnaires were distributed to the selected participants for this study. The use of questionnaires is that they are useful in obtaining information about opinions, not influenced by other participants in responding to questions; allow more time to respond to questions; as well as be helpful ambiguities are clarified and incomplete responses are followed-up immediately.

Data analysis procedure

Wiid and Diggines (2013:7) define data analysis as how the researcher spells out the purpose and logic of analysing, explaining the way gathered information will account for variations in some quality of responses. This study utilised descriptive data analysis to interpret and analyse empirical data. Throughout the analysis, researchers will demonstrate the challenges experienced by literate and semi-literate residents in the decision-making process of the language/s of communication between the public and local municipalities.

Ethical considerations

Concerning ethical considerations, participants were not coerced to participate in the research and all the questionnaires and reflections were conducted at their convenience. Moqhaka Local Municipality residents were not obliged to answer any question they did not feel comfortable responding to and were free to withdraw from the research process at any time if they felt uncomfortable. Moreover, for confidentiality reasons, the names of participants or any information that might reveal their identity have been omitted in this article. The ethical clearance had been sought and granted by the Moqhaka Local Municipality, Kroonstad, Free State, South Africa. Researchers confirmed all the necessary research ethics and integrity requirements.

3. Findings, Discussion of findings, and Recommendations

The results of the study and discussion will be dealt with in the following sections, based on the responses to the key research questions. Moqhaka Local Municipality residents (literate and semi-literate) responded to the following main questions:

1.   Is public participation in local municipality done successfully or a mere Constitutional requirement, especially with regards to issues of language use and respect?

2.   In your ward council meetings, do you (the public) participate or interact with your ward councillor about matters affecting you, such as a language of communication? Also, what language needs to be used?

Also, the respondents were allowed to in terms of the second section of the questionnaire, to express themselves regarding the issue of languages in their region.

Findings

The following findings were recorded:

Respondents

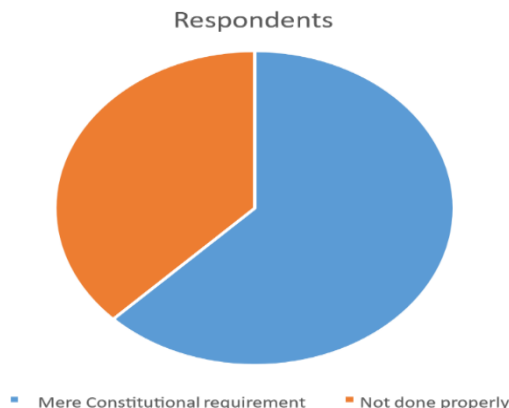● Mere Constitutional requirement   ● Not done properly

Figure 1. Public participation on Constitutional requirement

Out of 283 respondents, 177 (62,5%) indicated that public participation is just a mere Constitutional requirement, but it is not done properly. Residents indicated that they are informed, as if they are given announcements. Some indicated that councillors and ward committee members need to be trained on public participation. On the other hand, 106 (37.5%) believe that the councillor is partially using it as it is an obligation and does not do it properly (as it is supposed to be). They only credit him for calling them to a meeting.

Respondents

● Willingly address   ● Not doing enough
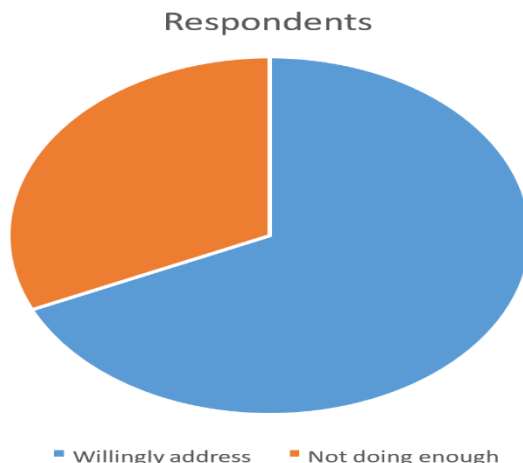
Figure 2. Language of communication at councillor's meeting with residents

Out of 283 respondents, 193 (68,2%) indicated that the councillor at times willingly addresses a meeting in their indigenous language and discusses the language of communication with them. On the other hand, 90 (31.8%) believe that the councillor is not doing enough, as they want the matter to be an item of the meeting's agenda. They also believe that their indigenous language should always be used because it is a regional language (Sesotho being the largely spoken language) within their jurisdiction.

4. Discussions

The findings below emanate from the questionnaire and issues discussed:

(i)   Residents (especially Black literate and semi-literate) saw the use of translator(s) as important. Most residents also saw the need as urgent and perhaps long overdue. This issue should have been dealt with by the government if the government sees this as crucial as the public views it.

(ii)   There is a clear indication by Black literate and semi-literate residents at Moqhaka Local Municipality that Sesotho as a regional language needs to be used as a language of communication between the local municipality and residents. This is currently happening as it should be.

(iii)   Black literate and semi-literate residents do experience language problem, especially with the current language that is mostly used, namely English. This is seen in their municipal rates and tax accounts which are written in English only.

(iv)   To a certain extent, some ward committee meetings are conducted in a commonly used language in those wards. But there is no clear policy guide of this matter.

(v) Moqhaka Local Municipality is not showing visible efforts in addressing language problems as some notices and announcements are not translated into the regional indigenous African languages.

5. Recommendations

The main purpose of this study was to critically look at public participation in a local municipality in South Africa, Moqhaka Local Municipality as a case study. In the light of the findings, the researchers highlight the following:

(i)   Local municipalities are encouraged to employ and use translator(s) within their municipal jurisdiction. This is because not all residents are literate, and failure to use local languages stifles communication between municipalities and citizens.

(ii)   Council or local municipality meetings are to be conducted in a language understood by their residents or to make use of interpreter(s) or translator(s) to convey information.

(iii) Local municipalities need to establish Language Units (to be headed by language managers) that may serve as a useful instrument to reduce language tensions generated by matters related to language issues. The Language Units, if agreed upon by local municipalities, could address, *inter alia*, the following issues:

• The sensitivities of communities regarding their language and culture.

• The establishment of a residents' language committee to advise local municipalities on the language needs of residents within their jurisdiction.

• The management of languages within the local municipalities.

• Research into language acquisition in a multilingual context and the dissemination of information.

(iv) South African local municipalities are urgently expected to allocate funds to implement and promote multilingualism. Funding should not be used as an excuse not to implement multilingualism.

(v) A flow chart similar to the one below, indicating how the promotion of multilingualism, could be implemented.
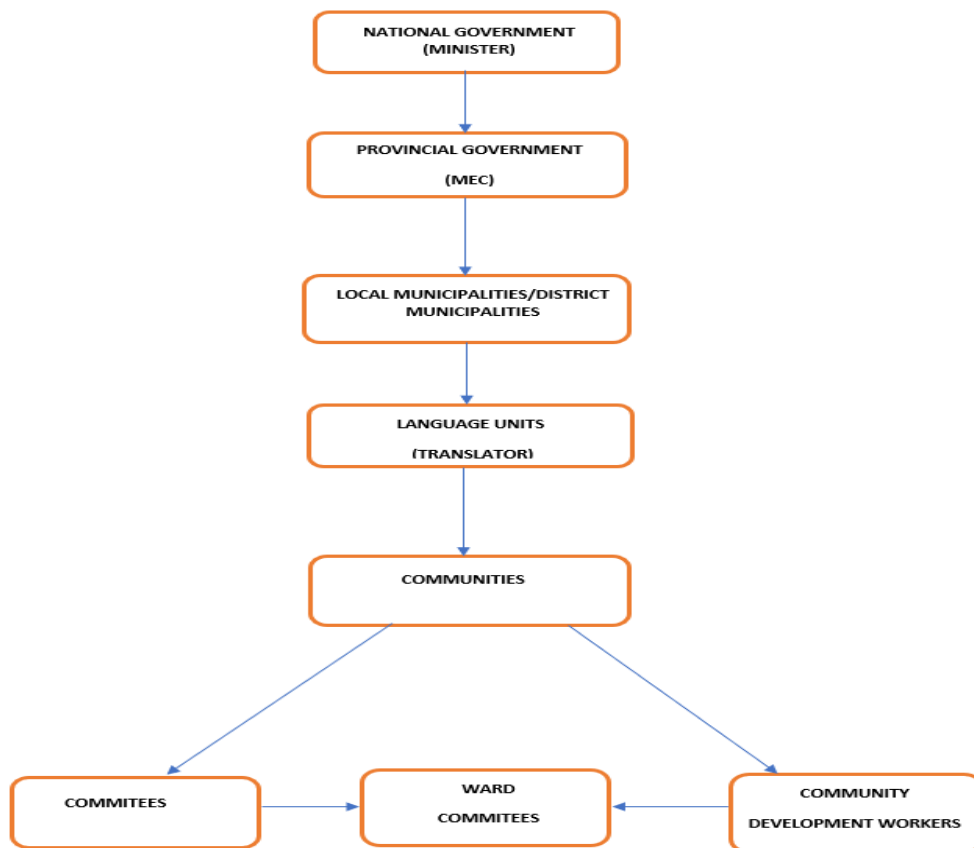

Figure 3. Promotion of multilingualism flow chart

The researchers are of the view that if local municipalities in South Africa are to fully let the public participate in matters affecting them directly, this will encourage and promote a healthy working relationship between the public and local municipalities in South Africa. The challenge of public demonstrations that sometimes result from local municipalities and citizens failing to find each other, could be severely reduced.

6. Conclusion

The public has a 60% input in the decisions made by any municipality, as per the stipulation set by the Public Participation Act of 1998. As a result, the public is to be prioritised when decisions are taken at local municipalities in South Africa. Public demonstrations that take place in South Africa because of service delivery challenges indicate that meaningful participation is still a goal that must be carefully followed and achieved. The *Batho Pele* Principles (1997) are to be fully implemented in guiding public service institutions, not only on service standards but also on public participation. Notably so, "consultation" as one of the Principles of *Batho Pele* puts forward that the public should be consulted about services to be rendered. Therefore, language use needs to be decided upon in consultation with the public concerned.

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