




Challenges of public participation in improving basic service delivery in Vhembe District Municipality, Limpopo, South Africa



Authors:

Sanah T. Matloga¹ 
 Ephraim Mahole¹ 
 Mutshutshu M.
 Nekhavhambe² 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Public and Development Administration, Faculty of Management, Commerce and Law, University of Venda, Thohoyandou, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Sanah Matloga,
 sanah.matloga@univen.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 03 Aug. 2023
 Accepted: 06 Mar. 2024
 Published: 16 Apr. 2024

How to cite this article:

Matloga, S.T., Mahole, E. & Nekhavhambe, M.M., 2024, 'Challenges of public participation in improving basic service delivery in Vhembe District Municipality, Limpopo, South Africa', *Journal of Local Government Research and Innovation* 5(0), a160. <https://doi.org/10.4102/jolgr.v5i0.160>

Copyright:

© 2024. The Authors.
 Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Background: Public participation is considered an essential element of good governance and an effective tool for the public to voice their opinion on local government issues. One of the purposes of local governance is to involve the community and community organisations in local government matters. This is laid out in Section 152 of South Africa's Constitution of 1996.

Aim: This study explores the challenges of public participation in improving basic service delivery in the Vhembe District Municipality (VDM).

Methods: A mixed-method research approach was used to determine the challenges of public participation in improving basic service delivery in VDM. The sample consisted of 15 participants, of which 10 were given a questionnaire and five were interviewed. The International Business Machinery: Statistical Product and Service Solution's latest version was used to analyse data collected through a questionnaire, and thematic analysis was used to analyse and interpret data collected through interviews.

Results: The study established that public members are reluctant to attend service delivery meetings because of the government's repeated failed service delivery promises. There was also a lack of consultation, hiring of unqualified personnel in strategic positions and failure to implement the municipality's integrated development plan.

Conclusion: The local government should actively support municipalities to address and overcome service delivery issues, such as resource constraints, corruption, instability and a lack of community engagement. Spheres of government should collaborate to find solutions by involving all parties through effective public involvement. Community-based organisations, traditional leaders and municipal councillors must be supported and empowered through workshops to acquire public participation skills and enhance basic service delivery.

Contribution: This article contributes to understanding how public participation can improve service delivery within municipalities. Public participation should become a core of good governance, stipulating that every public member must be involved in decision-making.

Keywords: public participation; basic services; consultation; municipality; Vhembe District Municipality.

Introduction

South African municipalities have been plagued by poor service delivery, with many communities experiencing inadequate access to basic services such as clean water, sanitation, electricity and waste removal (Mamokhere 2022). African countries, such as Lesotho and Zimbabwe, have similar challenges to public participation and service delivery (Marzuki 2015; Mapfumo 2015; Madzivanyika 2011). According to the European Institute for Public Participation (EIPP 2019), the lack of public participation is mainly caused by cost, a lack of skilled facilitators, low interest to participate and language barrier. The lack of public participation in governance is a serious challenge in the Vhembe District Municipality (VDM), particularly around basic service delivery issues such as water and electricity (Rankoana 2023:255). Section 152 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 provides the objectives of local government, among others, as follows: to ensure the provision of services to the communities sustainably and to encourage the participation of the communities and community organisations in local government matters.

The lack of public participation and poor service delivery in South African municipalities are a huge concern to the communities of VDM. Cloete et al. (2018) define public participation as the

involvement of public members to influence the outcome of activities and obtain as many benefits as possible. Kuye (2011:46) maintains that the South African government has committed itself to a form of public participation that is genuinely empowering and not a token of consultation or manipulation. This includes the creation of democratic representative structures such as ward committees, South African National Civic Organisations (SANCO), Community Development Workers (CDW) and Integrated Development Plan (IDP) forums to assist and support the means of public participation and service delivery. To deliver basic services effectively, municipalities must encourage public participation and consider the diverse needs, values and aspirations of the public they serve.

The importance of public participation is enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 Section 152 (1), which mandates all municipalities to inspire the commitment of public and public organisations in matters of local government and to ensure the provision of basic services to the public in a sustainable manner. Section 16 (1) of the *Local Government: Municipal Systems Act, 2000 (Act No. 32 of 2000)* states that a municipality must strive for a culture of municipal governance that embraces the delegation of government with a system of inclusive and consultative governance and through this, the municipalities must restore and come up with a good setting for the public to engage in the matters of the municipality. Municipalities are expected to act reasonably to extend basic services such as housing, water, refuse collection and electricity to everyone (Masia, Davids & Mangai 2019:23). For the municipality to deliver efficient and effective services to the public, the municipality must involve members of the public through public participation and inform them about the services they offer, including the period and method to be followed.

Masia et al. (2019:22) further indicate that the South African government, in all challenges, prioritised local government reforms to promote direct service delivery to communities. Selepe (2023) defines local government as the level of government mandated with the responsibility to deliver basic services such as water and sanitation, electricity and housing, including primary health care, community policing and refuse removal to the members of the public. According to Enwereji and Uwizeyimana (2020:131), public participation plays a significant role in improving the accountability of municipalities and the public they serve, which improves the linkages between them and public structures such as traditional leaders. Public participation in municipalities is low, given the cost and the nature of service delivery, which made it impossible for the communities to attend and have trust and hope in their representatives (Ragolane & Malatji 2021:34). Therefore, local government and municipalities must develop applicable methods and mechanisms to encourage public participation. An introduction and background followed by a problem statement, theoretical framework, and a literature review in the context of public participation and service delivery are clearly outlined in this article.

Problem statement

Public participation and basic service delivery in most South African municipalities are still challenging as communities always raise concerns about the services they need from the municipalities (Ragolane & Malatji 2021:32). The African National Congress (ANC) government, which came into power after the 1994 democratic elections, has been striving to improve the delivery of basic services to all people, regardless of race and colour. Vhembe District Municipality mainly comprises rural areas with a greater need for basic services. To improve the delivery of those basic services sustainably, municipalities should involve all structures representing members of the public. However, the problem is that the public and structures are reluctant to attend public participation meetings because of a lack of prior consultation by the municipality to give the agenda and clarify the importance of the meetings. Municipalities do not provide services, as enshrined in the South African Constitution, 1996, which states that local government must ensure the sustainable provision of services to communities and involve communities and community organisations in local government matters. Rankoana (2023:256) attests that in VDM, poverty is high, and infrastructure is limited, with little or no reliable basic services such as water.

Theoretical framework

The good governance theory emerged in the late 20th century through the World Bank as a paradigm shift formulated for a more positive and proactive strategy for good governance addressing the management of the public administration, responsibility and accountability in the public sector (Jeffrey, Christopher & Nnamdi 2019:115). Good governance theory is associated with governing methods and structures in developing countries such as South Africa. Good governance theory entails the involvement of every adult in the politics of his or her society (Ekundayo 2017). Fourie and Jordan (2017) added that governance is exercising an organisation's authority, direction and control to achieve its goals. Therefore, good governance theory is relevant as its principles entail accountability, transparency and inclusiveness.

The principles of good governance theory are geared towards enhancing ways and means of utilising government resources to benefit all citizens (Sheng 2008). Therefore, in a democratic government such as South Africa, public participation should become a core of good governance, stipulating that every public member must have a say in decision-making. Transparency in public administration has a significant impact on the process of public administration reform. It promotes efficiency, effectiveness and responsiveness as the main components of 'good governance' (Jashari & Pejaj 2018:61). Naidoo and Rampal (2018) view transparency as the sharing of information by the government to enable public members to participate in an informed manner and encourage them to be more involved in government matters. The South African Public Service Commission (2018) indicates that accountability is the obligation of government

officials to account for and be responsive to their activities by providing information about decisions and actions to the public members in a transparent and accountable manner.

According to Cloete et al. (2018), good governance is the primary mission of the public sector through effective policy management. In a democracy, power belongs to the people when they participate through their leaders or representatives. Public participation in governance involves stakeholders' direct or indirect involvement in decision-making about policies, plans or programmes they are interested in (Quick & Bryson 2022). This study used good governance theory to understand how public participation and municipal service delivery can be enhanced by strengthening the relationship between municipal officials and the public, including civil society and all stakeholders rooted in public participation. The civil society and municipal stakeholders are essential in ensuring that the community's needs are delivered sustainably, as enshrined in Section 152 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. In link with the theory, some key elements of good governance include accountability, participation, transparency, equity and inclusiveness.

Legislative framework for public participation

The importance of public participation is enshrined in Section 152 (1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, which mandates all municipalities to encourage the involvement of public and public organisations in matters of local government and to ensure the provision of basic services to the public in a sustainable manner. Section 16 (1) of the *Local Government: Municipal Systems Act, 2000 (Act No. 32 of 2000)* states that a 'municipality must develop a culture of municipal governance that complements the formal representative government with a system of participatory governance, and for this purpose, municipalities must encourage and create conditions for the public to participate in the affairs of the municipality'. According to Selepe (2023:765), local government has an important role in public service delivery. Effective leadership promotes good governance through transparency, collaboration, clear roles, involvement, understanding and responsibility in service delivery.

The role of the local government is to work with the public to find sustainable ways to meet their basic needs and improve their quality of life. Selepe (2023:762) further indicates that public participation in rural areas is a significant challenge because it is time-consuming and costly. Therefore, municipalities must develop applicable methods and mechanisms to encourage public participation. Nnadodzi (2013:84) maintains that public participation promotes good governance and human rights values. Moreover, many people in South Africa are denied access to basic services and sidelined from mainstream activities such as IDP forum meetings, mayoral imbizos, and processes that lead to efficient and effective service delivery through public participation. *Local Government: Municipal Structures Act,*

1998 (Act No. 117 of 1998) indicates that a municipality must strive within its capacity to achieve the objectives set out in Section 152 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, which indicates that 'a municipal council must annually review the needs of the public and prioritise to meet those needs'. Kalonda and Govender (2021) attest that poor service delivery frustrates communities, resulting in irregular protests and inadequate good governance.

The White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service (1997) also supports the development of the potential of each citizen for self-reliance and sustainability as a priority. Public participation allows public members more opportunities to play an active role in decision-making, which builds trust and a strong relationship between the government and the public. This study is expected to help the VDM find ways of involving public members in local government matters, especially at a municipal level, to build a better life for all. The study will also assist in educating members of the public on how to get involved in matters that concern them, especially at the local municipal level. It will also augment literature informing municipalities on how and when to consult and involve different public organisations when providing services to avoid public protests.

Literature review

The literature review on the challenges of public participation is guided by good governance theory. This section reviews the literature on the challenges of public participation and essential service delivery in municipalities. The legislations that regulate the functions and operations of municipalities in South Africa, the National Development Plan (NDP), the District Development Model (DDM) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) form part and parcel of the literature that is reviewed in this study. Before 1994, South Africa was under an apartheid government, and many citizens, mainly black people, were discriminated against and could not participate in government decision-making processes such as voting. According to Tshoose (2017:2), South Africa's democracy is founded on accountable governance and public participation principles. Public participation is key in monitoring government performance, strengthening public accountability and improving service delivery. However, in the past, the black population was not allowed to participate in general elections or the decision-making process and implement policies that affected their daily lives. The democratic government came into power in 1994, focusing on changing unconstitutional laws, building democracy, introducing transparent legislatures and establishing new institutions to promote democracy, community engagement and human rights (Mangu 2020).

Considering the above, Masuku and Macheke (2020:8) view public participation as a process involving community engagement at the grassroots level to articulate their voices. Through public participation, public members can voice their opinions on issues that concern them to influence

decision-making processes to represent the people's will (Umoh 2022). Public participation safeguards democracy and encourages accountability and responsiveness to the public's input in the decision-making process (Kabingesi 2021:20). Therefore, public participation is not limited to service delivery issues. It offers the public an opportunity to ensure that the government is accountable for its activities and acts within the parameters of law. A successful public participation can result in a greater understanding of the community's needs and solutions to their problems.

Challenges of public participation and basic service delivery in municipalities

According to Reddy (2016), local government is created to bring the government closer to the people by giving them a sense of ownership and involvement in the political processes that control their lives. Without public participation, democracies cannot effectively and efficiently respond to public needs. Even though South Africa has a public participation framework and democratic innovation in fostering public participation, there are obstacles, such as limited resources, a lack of public interest, corruption, ineffective governance and a lack of feedback from the government (Gumede 2021). This results in the inadequate follow-up of issues raised by the public and the lack of feedback mechanisms undermining participation. Public participation can be achieved by meeting municipal stakeholders such as ratepayers' associations, community-based organisations (CBOs), vigilante groups, political associations and all public members.

Molepo, Maleka and Khalo (2020:345) argue that public participation of all members and stakeholders is important for the delivery of basic services and for enhancing good governance. The challenges arise when municipalities fail to involve members of the public in matters that affect them. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 and other pieces of legislation encourage public participation in the affairs of the municipalities through various policy initiatives. According to Zondi (2015:81), the current state of local government in South Africa reflects many challenges related to service delivery despite good local government legislation that promotes public participation and service delivery. Zondi (2015:82) further indicates that various environmental forces, including cultural and social, political, technological and economic factors influence service delivery in South Africa.

According to Cooperate Governance, Human Settlements and Traditional Affairs (COGHSTA 2019), for municipalities to overcome challenges of public participation and basic service delivery, they must go back to basics and:

- ensure constant contact with community members through effective public participation platforms
- create a condition for a decent living by delivering the right quality services, demonstrating good governance and accountability

- ensure the delivery of services sustainably as the objective of local government as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996
- build and maintain a sound institutional and administrative capability to promote good governance and human rights by acknowledging the right of the people to participate in local government
- narrow the social distance between the electorate and government institutions in recognising the value of the people investing and contributing to good governance with people participating as individuals and interest groups within the community.

Local Government: Municipal Systems Act, 2000 (Act No. 32 of 2000) and the *Local Government: Municipal Structures Act, 1998 (Act No. 117 of 1998)* are other pieces of legislation that promote public participation and regulate the functions of municipalities to minimise challenges. According to Selepe (2023:761), municipalities, in their capacity as the third and lowest sphere of government and the one that functions closest to communities, have often been described as comprising the sphere of government that is tasked mainly with the development and provision of services to communities.

Section 152 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, and Section 17 of the *Local Government: Municipal Systems Act, 2000 (Act No. 32 of 2000)* lay down mechanisms, processes and procedures for public participation, which provides members of the public with a model of governance.

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic devastated the delivery of basic services by municipalities and the health and livelihoods of its citizens. During this pandemic, municipalities were still expected to function and provide essential services such as water, sanitation, electricity and solid waste removal to the communities. Silva (2022) states that local governments in South Africa have been criticised for their inability to provide and maintain basic services and are seldom able to facilitate social and economic development. The South African Local Government Association (SALGA), in its briefing to the Parliamentary Committee on Cooperative Government and Traditional Affairs on 28 April 2020 and Mamokhere (2022) highlighted some of the challenges municipalities such as a lack of participation in municipal affairs, a lack of accountability and transparency, a lack of efficiency and effectiveness, a lack of access to information and municipal planning, and political administration interference, including fraud and corruption.

Factors that contribute to the lack of public participation and service delivery: An African perspective

According to Mwiru and Marsela (2015:18), various factors influence public participation in improving basic service delivery as follows.

Centralisation of decision-making

Mwiru and Marsela (2015:18) state that the centralisation of decision-making concentrates power on the top of the organisational hierarchy and forgets about the poorest of the poor and the marginalised, such as women and people living with disability. For example, regarding service delivery, the poorest of the poor in rural areas suffer the most. A case of Vuwani village under Collins Chabane Local Municipality failed to get services because of the power shift from Makhado Local Municipality to Collins Chabane Local Municipality (Kanyane, Adonis & Rules 2020).

Lack of transparency

Transparency goes with the promotion of openness and honesty by municipalities on the issues of public participation and service delivery. Jashari and Pejaj (2018:62) state that transparency means being open, communicative and responsive. Sciso (2017:251) views transparency as a supportive tool for assessing the administration level and a theme of good governance and accountability supporting successful public participation. The lack of transparency in municipalities tends to influence officials to get involved in corruption and mismanagement. Transparency is a worldwide issue discussed both at the global level through initiatives of Government Partnership and at the national and local level through the involvement of government and municipal officials (Rodrigues 2020:238).

Time constraints

Ndlovu (2016:21) views time as a constraint or obstacle to public participation because participatory techniques regularly require vast time and power, and most people are unwilling to participate. During the interview, some participants indicated that public participation costs time and money, making them reluctant to attend.

Poor leadership qualities

For Mwiru and Marsela (2015:21), good leadership qualities are when leaders effectively and efficiently use their skills to direct the activities of subordinates to achieve reasonable organisational goals. The success and failure of an organisation depend on the leadership's knowledge, ability and skills. Matemilolo, Fayed and Sijuede (2020:1) view public participation as an accessible and responsible process through which individuals and groups within a typical geographical area exchange views and influence decision-making. A lack of leadership qualities reduces the lack of public participation in civil society.

Lack of education

Lack of education is a barrier to effective participation when people lack confidence and hope that they can handle their problems. Baijnath (2018) points out that South Africa is characterised by a lack of capacity among the underprivileged regarding access to education and mediums of communication used during public participation meetings. Therefore, public participation is viewed as empowerment and often benefits

those better equipped to harness its potential. In view of the above, public members should be allowed to participate and access relevant information for effective planning and development.

Political interference

Ndlovu (2016:24) argues that political interference obstructs public participation. Political interference with local government planning and operations hinders effective civic participation in Zimbabwe. The Union Report on Debt stated that there was undue interference by politicians in places such as Harare and Chitungwiza (Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development 2016) and claimed that those who supported and sympathised with the rule were members of the Zimbabwe African National United Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party. Mapfumo (2015) identified the following challenges of political interference in Zimbabwe: economic challenges and a lack of knowledge and understanding, which are relatively associated with political interference.

Economic challenges

Public participation comes at a cost. Involving the public in decision-making is time-consuming and costly regarding money and energy (European Institute for Public Participation [EIPP] 2019). As Zimbabwe faces economic challenges, using the scarce resources available to pull public participation is difficult (Madzivanyika 2011). However, public members cannot initiate participation if the appropriate process does not exist. Mapfumo (2015) argues that the newly amended Zimbabwe Constitution envisages a participatory framework. In addition, the arrangement of forums, workshops or public meetings requires adequate funds, long preparation time and enough staff. However, while public participation requires resources such as skill, time and money, it can also generate numerous advantages (Quick & Bryson 2016:3).

Lack of knowledge and understanding

Marzuki (2015:30) argues that the lack of knowledge and understanding are severe impediments to meaningful participation by the public. This requires the government to develop a civil educational programme to educate people on governance issues. Public members also explained why local governments are useless as they do not receive the services they expect from the local community.

Despite the challenges to public participation and service delivery, the Lesotho government made some efforts in trying to embrace public participation by establishing different structures at local levels, such as District Development Committees (DDCs) and Village Development Committees (VDCs) under the provision of the *Lesotho Local Government Act of 1969* which was enacted shortly after independence. These structures were to work for public participation and to facilitate development planning at local levels (Khiba 2017). Section 20(1) of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Lesotho (1993) accords all citizens with the right to participate in governance processes directly or through

their representatives. Governments should be open and accommodate citizens to participate in public policy-making processes to ensure that decisions taken reflect the needs of citizens in general. Through public participation, stakeholders may interact with government agencies, political leaders, nonprofit organisations and business organisations that create or implement public policies and programmes (Quick & Bryson 2016:1). Local government must ensure that there are effective channels of communication in the municipality for information to reach everybody for effective participation in matters that affect them.

Introduction of District Development Model and Sustainable Development Goals to solve service delivery challenges

The DDM was introduced in 2019 to solve the problems of poor service delivery and ensure sustainable development to eradicate poverty, unemployment and inequality. Khambule (2021) avers that a state cannot be considered capable if the sphere of government at the forefront of service delivery is mired in failures. The DDM is a framework for service delivery from a district to a national level. The model focuses on ensuring the country meets the developmental targets set in the NDP and SDGs 2030 to address the service delivery challenges in municipalities. The Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (2019) refers to the DDM as an operational model for improving cooperative governance for building a capable, ethical and developmental state by which the three spheres of government and state entities work collaboratively in an impact-oriented way for coherent service delivery and development.

According to Kgobe (2020), the effectiveness of local government service delivery, democracy and compliance is impeded by various factors, including tensions between political and administrative interfaces, insufficient council capacity, the separation of powers, issues of accountability and challenges related to legal compliance. The *Local Government: Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000* states that the local government should ensure that local people are included in service delivery planning. South African local municipalities are antagonised by problems related to service delivery planning. They need to prioritise the wellbeing of society in their municipal planning and coordination of integrated development planning to improve service delivery (Kgobe, Bayat & Karriem 2023a). Service delivery challenges in South African municipalities include corruption, political interference, socio-economic inequalities and a lack of leadership ethics (John et al. 2023). However, there should be a transformational leadership approach to enhance collaboration, trust and meaningful participation for improved service delivery in municipalities. South Africa is marked by a history of inequality and spatial disparities, and fostering Local Economic Development (LED) has become crucial in municipalities (Kgobe, Mabeba & Mamokhere 2023b). Public participation is crucial in shaping the LED and SDG trajectory in South African municipalities in improving service delivery.

Methodology

A mixed research methodology was used to get information from 15 respondents through a structured questionnaire with close-ended questions and a structured interview schedule with open-ended questions. Five (5) participants from VDM, comprising municipal employee, a councillor, a traditional leader, a community representative and a CDW representative, were interviewed face-to-face, and 10 respondents were given questionnaires. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were knowledgeable about public participation and service delivery.

Quantitative data were analysed through statistical analysis. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis in a narrative form. A pragmatic research approach was employed as it was associated with the mixed method research to select an appropriate method to determine the challenges of public participation in improving basic service delivery in VDM. Kaushik and Walsh (2019:2) argue that a pragmatic approach provides an opportunity to select the appropriate research methods from a wide range of qualitative and quantitative methods. A field study was used because it is convenient, and the research was conducted by directly observing and interacting with the participants to obtain information. All the participants signed informed consent forms before completing questionnaires and engaging in interview sessions. In addition, ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Venda's Research Directorate.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the University of Venda's Research Ethics Committee (REC) in November 2020. The clearance number is SMS/20/PDN/18/2501.

Results

In this article, the quantitative data were presented in the form of graphs to visualise the interpretation of the result showing gender, positions of the participants and results of the questions asked during the survey.

The researchers intended to have an equal number of men and women when distributing the research instruments. However, most respondents were men because more men were employed at VDM than women (Figure 1) (Matloga et al. 2023).

The majority of the respondents were VDM employees, followed by representatives of community-based organisations, councillors, CDW coordinators and traditional leaders (Figure 2) (Matloga et al. 2023). From this, it can be concluded that most of the respondents who took part in the study were VDM employees, those who were more involved in public participation and service delivery in the municipality.

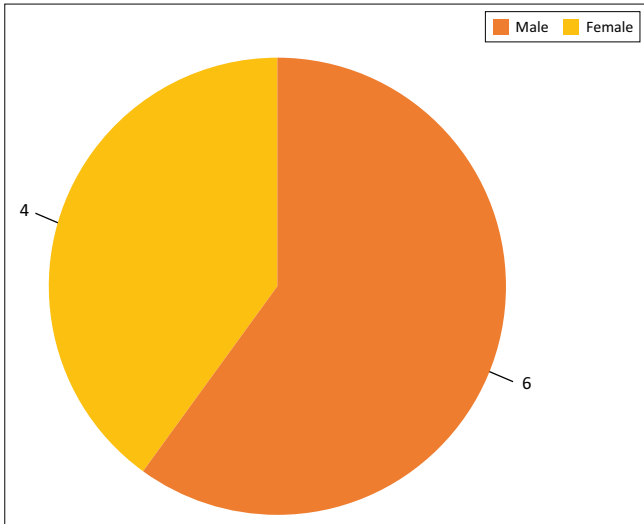


FIGURE 1: Gender of participants.

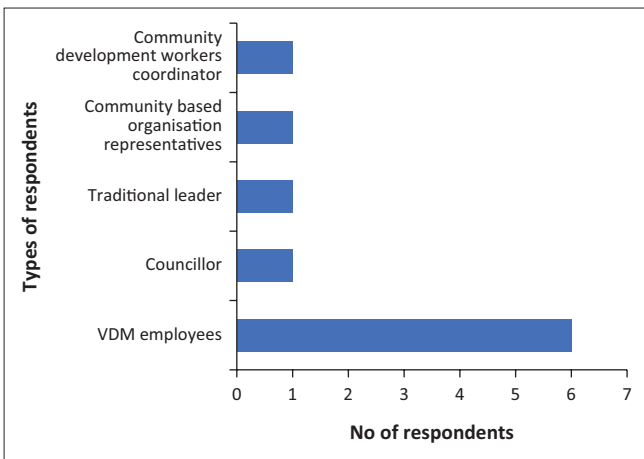


FIGURE 2: Position of respondents.

In the findings, most respondents agreed that public members are reluctant to attend service delivery meetings because of empty promises from the municipality (Figure 3). Therefore, VDM should encourage public participation and provide resources to capacitate public members to attend meetings and apply the principles of Batho-Pele in cases where they have failed to fulfil their promises.

Findings revealed that nearly half of the respondents agreed with the statement that the lack of consultation by the municipality causes poor service delivery. Although some were unsure about the statement, most respondents agreed that the lack of consultation by the municipality causes poor service delivery (Figure 4). Consultation is the main ingredient for public participation and service improvement. One of the principles of Batho-Pele is that municipalities should strive to consult members of the public in all matters that affect them.

Most respondents strongly agreed that a lack of public participation puts the public at a disadvantage when delivering essential services (Figure 5) (Matloga et al. 2023). A lack of public participation causes public protest and

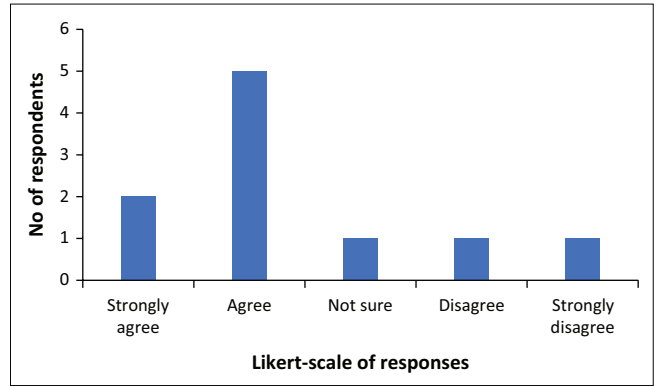


FIGURE 3: Members of the public are reluctant to attend service delivery meetings.

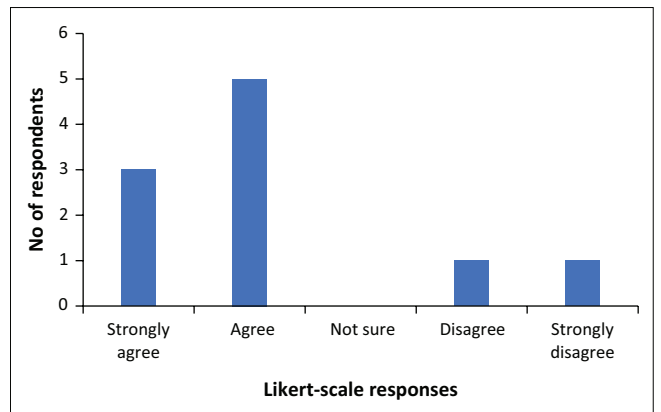


FIGURE 4: Lack of consultation by the municipality causes poor service delivery.

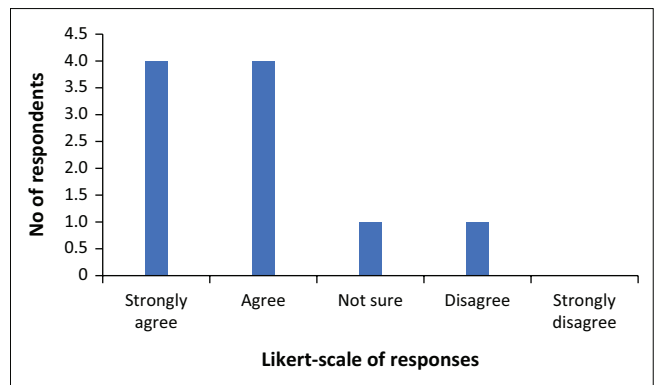


FIGURE 5: Lack of public participation puts the public at a disadvantage regarding essential service delivery.

political instability. The findings revealed that the lack of public participation leads to protests and political instability. No one disagreed with the above statement and one (10%) respondent was unsure. The findings also revealed that the lack of public participation denies public members the ability to voice their thoughts regarding the services they need. For public participation to be meaningful, it should encourage the involvement of all stakeholders, such as marginalised pensioners, youth and people living with disabilities.

During interviews, participants indicated that many challenges prevent effective public participation and basic service delivery within VDM. Below are the participants' responses:

Participant A: Challenges are caused by the community's perception of the government, and the public is reluctant to participate in the municipality because of empty promises made by the government.

Participant B: Poor attendance by stakeholders, understanding of processes and understanding of responsibilities such as who is responsible for what in local and district municipalities causes challenges in improving basic service delivery.

Participant C: Challenges are caused by municipalities hiring unqualified personnel in strategic positions.

Participant D: To my observation, stakeholders are not consulted, feedback of the decision agreed upon on public participation is not conveyed back to the people, inadequate financial resources, inadequate human resources, time-consuming and not taking into consideration the public inputs are the main challenges of public participation in VDM.

Participant E: People do not attend public participation meetings as it is time-consuming, lack of consultation by the municipality, financial constraints, and lack of resources to capacitate community members and stakeholders to attend the meeting.

Communities with better service delivery and effective policy management better understand local government priorities (ElMassah & Mohieldin 2020). Therefore, local government should be closer to the people and develop mechanisms to interact with them to identify basic service needs and priorities through public participation. Municipalities are struggling to deliver basic services, especially in rural municipalities such as VDM, which has manifested in the crime of illegal electricity connections and public protests.

For effective public participation and municipal service delivery, there is a need to strengthen the relationship between municipal officials and the public, including civil society and all stakeholders rooted in public participation. According to Rankoana (2023:252), VDM experiences a lack of adequate resources to provide basic services such as water to the community. Vhembe District Municipality should make budget provisions to capacitate members and to improve public participation to bring members of the public and government together. Municipalities should further involve members of the public in development projects as it encourages ownership. Training and workshop sessions should be provided in the workplace to assist officials in understanding the process of public participation and service delivery. In the process of public participation and service delivery, Batho-Pele principles could serve as a strategy to address challenges through implementing the IDP and Service Delivery Budget Implementation Plan (SDBIP). Vhembe District Municipality must improve its communication system to promote public participation and efficient service delivery.

Rankoana (2023:254) further noted that VDM needs the active participation of municipal councillors and traditional leaders to act as intermediaries between them and the community, especially in improving basic service delivery. On the other hand, there is an opinion that community members need to be educated on how to participate in local government matters. Vhembe District Municipality should introduce programmes to support councillors in continuing to encourage public participation. In addition, CBOs, traditional leaders and municipal councillors must be supported and capacitated through workshops to acquire skills to encourage public participation and the improvement of basic service delivery. The study's findings also attest that people resort to protests and infrastructure vandalism to attract government attention because of poor service delivery.

Discussion, implications and recommendations

The study's objective sought to make recommendations for the strategies that can be used to address the challenges related to public participation and basic service delivery in the VDM. The research findings revealed that most respondents agreed that there are no resources to capacitate members of the public to participate actively in municipal affairs. Members of the public must be informed about IDP meetings. The researchers found out that participants suggested the introduction of an IDP. The formation of a partnership between the municipality and members of the public, IDP forums, pastors' forums and youth forums can also be used as strategies that can address challenges of public participation and basic service delivery in VDM. The research findings revealed that mayoral *imbizos*, outreach programmes, and the involvement of all stakeholders in municipal affairs can work as strategies to address the challenges of basic service delivery. Recruiting qualified personnel to occupy strategic positions in different departments within the municipality can also address challenges facing basic service delivery.

These personnel will bring in-depth knowledge of work and ideas for improving the delivery of basic services to the public. Implementing the SDBIP, the Performance Management System (PMS) in accordance with the PMS framework and the involvement of CBOs can be used as strategies to address challenges facing basic service delivery in the VDM. The research also revealed that training municipal personnel and recruiting qualified municipal officials in strategic positions can benefit the municipality. The findings revealed that community awareness, influential ward committees, and benchmarking with other municipalities at the same level could work as strategies to address basic service delivery challenges in the VDM.

Based on the study's findings, it is recommended that municipalities continue to consult members of the public in any process or development within its jurisdiction. This was confirmed by the results from the questionnaire, where most

respondents agreed that municipalities should consult members of the public. This shows a good relationship between members of the public and the municipality. Municipalities should encourage members of the public to attend service delivery meetings because most respondents agreed that members of the public are reluctant to attend service delivery meetings. In addition, CBOs, traditional leaders and municipal councillors must be supported and capacitated through workshops to acquire skills for encouraging public participation and the improvement of basic service delivery. The study recommends that municipalities improve their consultation methods for basic service delivery.

Municipalities should hire qualified personnel to avoid poor management and encourage all stakeholders to attend imbizos and participate actively. It is recommended that VDM consult all stakeholders and members of the public, encourage public participation and ensure that strategic positions are filled by qualified personnel to improve basic service delivery. It is recommended that the municipalities implement the principles of Batho-Pele in accordance with the White Paper on Public Service Transformation, 1997, to encourage the youth to be involved in the municipality affairs and to use the language that members of the public understand. According to Ragolane and Malatji (2021:40), the government should avoid making empty promises to the community as it makes them reluctant to attend public participation meetings and anything linked to the government. The researcher further recommends that employees responsible for public participation and those in key positions attached to delivering basic service must be well-trained to perform their duties effectively.

To promote effective participation when consulting people, the municipality must use the language spoken by people in a particular area, such as *Tshivenda* or *Xitsonga*, which are common languages in the VDM. Furthermore, public participation should be scheduled during the weekend to allow civil servants and those who work during the week to get the opportunity to attend the meeting. Municipalities should have workshops to educate all stakeholders and public representatives on how municipal programmes operate to serve the public. This includes providing relevant information to members of the public to help them understand the procedures and processes of the municipality.

This study determined the challenges of community participation in improving basic services in the VDM in the Limpopo Province. It is recommended that the same study be conducted in other municipalities in the Limpopo Province and South Africa as a whole. The results will support South Africa as a democratic country in identifying challenges, roles, strengths and weaknesses of public participation in an endeavour to improve the delivery of basic services in municipalities. The VDM and other municipalities in the same category should take advantage of the findings and recommendations of this research to encourage

public participation and improve basic service delivery. Municipalities should also encourage all stakeholders, youth, including people with disabilities, to be involved in all matters of municipal development through workshops and the establishment of youth and disability units.

Limitations of the study

Although the study used mixed research methods, the findings were based on the inputs of the selected few based in VDM, Limpopo. As such, the findings of this study may not be applicable outside the specific context of the inquiry or generalised to the whole population. The study sample of 15 participants also limits the applicability of the findings outside the scope of the beliefs, experiences, attitudes and perceptions of selected individuals in the specific area of jurisdiction. It is recommended that future researchers investigate strategies that municipalities can use to improve service delivery through public participation.

Conclusions

Sustainable service delivery within the municipalities can be achieved through effective public participation and proper consultation of all relevant stakeholders. The municipality should play an essential role in ensuring that all stakeholders are involved in matters of the municipality by introducing mayoral imbizos, IDP forums, business forums, and youth and people living with disabilities forums to improve basic service delivery. As basic service delivery challenges in South Africa, such as water and electricity, remain a thorn in the public's flesh, spheres of government must work together to find a solution by engaging all stakeholders through effective participation. The introduction of DDM should bear fruits by addressing service delivery issues within municipalities.

As one of the rural municipalities in South Africa, VDM faces many challenges in basic service delivery, resulting in political instability and damage to municipal infrastructure. To counter these challenges, the municipality introduced mayoral and community outreach programmes. The lesson learned from the findings is that municipalities must ensure that public members are consulted and given relevant information beforehand to avoid misunderstandings. Municipalities should introduce civic education to educate members of the public about the importance of attending public participation meetings as most see it as time-consuming. Municipalities must hire qualified personnel in managerial positions to avoid poor management and improve basic service delivery to the community.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

S.T.M. contributed to the literature, methodology, analysis, investigation and writing, while E.M. and M.M.N. reviewed and edited the article.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed during this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

References

- Bajjnath, N., 2018, 'Learning for development in the context of South Africa: Considerations for open education resources in improving higher education outcomes', *Journal of Learning for Development* 5(2), 87–100. <https://doi.org/10.56059/jl4d.v5i2.299>
- Cloete, F., De conning, C., Wissink, H. & Rabie, B., 2018, *Improving public policy for good governance*, 4th edition, Van Schaick Publishers, Pretoria.
- Cooperate Governance, Human Settlements and Traditional Affairs (COGHSTA), 2019, *For municipalities to overcome the challenges of public participation and basic service delivery, they must go back to basics*, viewed 10 May 2023, from <http://www.coghsta.ncpg.gov.za/index.php/about-us/strategic-goals>.
- Department of Cooperative Governance, 2019, *Coordinated service delivery model*, President Coordinating Council.
- Department of Cooperative Governance & Traditional Affairs (COGTA), 2019, *Government Departments & Entities 2019/20 Annual Performance Plan State of Local Government in South Africa*, Pretoria.
- Ekundayo, W.J., 2017, 'Good governance theory and the quest for good governance in Nigeria', *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 7(5), 154–161.
- ElMassah, S. & Mohieldin, M., 2020, 'Digital transformation and localizing the sustainable development goals (SDGs)', *Ecological Economics* 169, 106490. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2019.106490>
- Enwereji, P.C. & Uwizeyimana, D., 2020, 'Engaging traditional leaders in municipal governance: The case of South African Municipalities. Indilinga', *African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems* 19(1), viewed 23 April 2022, from <https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/EJC-1ee4229b6e>.
- European Institute for Public Participation (EIPP), 2019, *Public Participation in Europe: An international perspective*, viewed 10 May 2023, from https://www.partizipation.at/fileadmin/media_data/Downloads/Zukunftsdiskurse-Studien/pp_in_e_report_03_06.pdf.
- Fourie, D. & Jordan, J., 2017, 'Contextualizing the measurement of governance in public financial management', *Journal of Public Administration* 42(5), 35–45.
- Gisselquist, R.M., 2012, *Good governance as a concept, and why this matters for development policy*, United Nations University –The World Institute for Development Economic Research (UNU-WIDER), Helsinki.
- Gumede, W., 2021, 'Delivering democratic developmental state cities in South Africa', *African Journal of Public Affairs* 12(1), 1–27.
- Jashari, M. & Pepaj, I., 2018, 'The role of the principle of transparency and accountability in public administration', *Acta Universitatis Danubius* 10(1), viewed 20 April 2022, from <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/229465497>.
- Jeffrey, E.I.E., Christopher, U.O. & Nnamdi, O.C., 2019, 'Good governance: The conceptual and contextual perspectives', *Acta Universitatis Danubius* 11(1), 113–131. <https://dj.univ-danubius.ro/index.php/AUDA/article/view/139>.
- John, M., Nhlamulo, M., Richard, C.K. & Victor, N.M., 2023, 'Leadership Styles: Unveiling the Nexus with Service Delivery Performance in South African Municipalities', *IAHRW International Journal of Social Sciences Review* 11(4), 505–513.
- Kabingsesi, A., 2021, 'An assessment of public participation in the lawmaking and other activities of the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa', Master's thesis, Stellenbosch University.
- Kalonda, J.K. & Govender, G., 2021, 'Factors affecting municipal service delivery: A case study of Katima Mulilo Town Council, Namibia', *African Journal of Public Affairs* 12(2), viewed 09 May 2023, from <https://journals.co.za/doi/epdf/10.10520/ejc-ajpa>.
- Kanyane, M., Adonis, C. & Rule, S., 2020, 'Vuwani: Understanding the violent community response to municipal boundary re-demarcation', *African Security Review* 30(1), 102–120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2020.1845760>
- Kaushik, V. & Christine, A., 2019, *Pragmatism as a research paradigm and its implications for social work research*, Walsh Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB.
- Kgobe, F.K.L., 2020, 'Africanised public administration sold out public service delivery: a case of South Africa', *5th Annual International Conference on Public Administration and Development Alternatives*, Virtual Conference, October 7–9, 2020.
- Kgobe, F., Bayat, M.S. & Karriem, A., 2023a, *Evaluating the implementation of public participation in service delivery planning in the democratic age: A case of South African Municipalities*, 20pp., Commonwealth Youth and Development, Pretoria, South Africa.
- Kgobe, F.K.L., Mabeba, S.J. & Mamokhere, J., 2023b, 'The Effects of Public Participation on Local Economic Development in South African Municipalities', *International Journal of Environmental, Sustainability, and Social Science* 4(6), 1773–1789. <https://doi.org/10.38142/ijess.v4i6.776>
- Khambule, I., 2021, *The district development model: Towards a capable local development state in South Africa*, The University of KwaZulu-Natal, viewed from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355427718>.
- Khiba, M.B., 2017, *Public participation in the formulation of public policy: The case of Lesotho National Decentralisation Policy in Maseru District*, The University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.
- Madzivanyika, L., 2011, *The impact of weaknesses in the urban councils act on efficient and effective service delivery in urban local councils in Zimbabwe*, University of Western Cape, Cape Town.
- Mamokhere, J., 2022, 'Understanding the complex interplay of governance, systematic, and structural factors affecting service delivery in South African Municipalities', *Commonwealth Youth and Development* 20(2), 28. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2663-6549/12230>
- Mapfumo, L., 2019, *Public participation and collaborative governance in Zimbabwean Flea Market: A case of the City of Harare*, The University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.
- Marzuki, A., 2015, 'Challenges of public participation and the decision-making process', *Institute for Social Research* 201(1), 21–39.
- Masiya, T., Davids, Y.D. & Mangai, M.S., 2019, 'Assessing service delivery: Public perception of municipal service delivery in South Africa', *Theoretical and Empirical Research in Urban Management* 14(2), 20–40, viewed 10 May 2023, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26633007>.
- Masuku, S. & Macheke, T., 2020, 'Policy making and governance structures in Zimbabwe: Examining their efficacy as a conduit to equitable participation (inclusion) and social justice for rural youths', *Cogent Social Sciences* 7(1), 1855742. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2020.1855742>
- Matemilola, S., Fadeyi, O. and Sijuade, T., 2020. Paris agreement. *Encyclopedia of sustainable management*, 2020, p.1.
- Molepo, J.N., Maleka, C.M. & Khalo, T., 2020, *Public participation and service delivery: The case of the city of Tshwane*, The Tshwane University of Technology, Research Gate, South Africa.
- Mwiru, N. & Marsela, N., 2015, *The importance of community participation in development projects at the local level. A case of Dodoma Municipal Council*, Local Government and Management of Mzumbe University Tanzania, Tanzania.
- Naidoo, C. & Ramphal, R.R., 2018, 'The factors that affect Public Participation for effective Municipal Service Delivery: A case of ward committees', *South African Journal of Industrial Engineering* 29(4), 82–93. <https://doi.org/10.7166/29-4-1948>
- National Development Plan (NDP), 2030, *Implementation of the District Development Model: A report on lessons learnt from the piloting phase*. Government printers, Pretoria, South Africa.
- Ndlovu, N.N., 2016, *Participation of wards in Operation Sukhuma Sakhe Activities within the City of Umhlatuze*, Department of Anthropology and Development Studies, University of Zululand.
- Nnandodzi, R.C., 2013, *South African basic service delivery in post-apartheid: The African statistical journal volume 16, institutional planning and research directorate*, Mangosuthu University of Technology, Durban.
- Quick, K.S. & Bryson, J., 2016, *Theories of public participation in governance*, University of Minnesota Twin Cities, Edward Elgar Press, Publishers.
- Ragolane, M. & Malatji, T.L., 2021, 'Lack of public participation and good governance, who is fooling who?', *Technium Social Sciences Journal* 26, 32–44. <https://doi.org/10.47577/tssj.v26i1.5088>
- Rankoana, S.A., 2023, 'Challenges experienced with water services delivery in the Limpopo Province, South Africa: A case study of a rural community in Vhembe District Municipality', *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review* 6(9), 251–259. <https://doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v6i9.1219>

- Reddy, P.S., 2016, 'The politics of service delivery in South Africa: The local government sphere in context', *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 12(1), a337. <https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v12i1.337>
- Republic of South Africa, 2018, *Public Service Commission: South Africa*, viewed 10 May 2023, from <https://www.gov.za/public-service-commission>.
- Rodrigues, K.F., 2020, 'Unveiling the concept of transparency: Its limits, varieties, and the creation of a typology', *Cad. EBAPE.BR* 18(2), 237–253. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1679-395173192x>
- Sciso, E. (ed.), 2017, *Accountability, transparency and democracy in the functioning of Bretton woods institutions*, Springer International Publishing AG and G.
- Selepe, M.M., 2023, *The factors that impact negatively on municipal service delivery and the mechanisms that must be adopted to enhance the provision of services in South Africa*, Department of Public Administration, University of Limpopo, South Africa.
- Sheng, Y.K., 2008, *What is good governance?*, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), viewed n.d., from <http://www.unescap.org>.
- Silva, C.N., 2022, *Local government and the COVID-19 pandemic: A global perspective*, Springer Nature Switzerland AG Publishers, Cham.
- South African Local Government Association (SALGA), 2020, *Parliamentary briefing*, viewed from <http://www.salga.org.za/Documents/Knowledge-products-per-theme>.
- The Constitution of the Kingdom of Lesotho, 1993, *Amended in 2018*, viewed from https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Lesotho_2018.pdf?lang=en.
- The Republic of South Africa, 1996, *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, Government Printers, Pretoria.
- The Republic of South Africa, 1997, *White paper on public service transformation*, Government Printers, Pretoria.
- The Republic of South Africa, 1998, *Local government: Municipal Structures Act (Act 117 of 1998)*, Government Printers, Pretoria.
- The Republic of South Africa, 2000, *Local Government: Municipal Systems Act (Act 32 of 2000)*, Government Printers, Pretoria.
- Tshoose, I.C., 2027, 'The role of public participation viewed in the context of adjudicating socio-economic rights', *Southern African Public Law* 32(1–2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2522-6800/3560>
- Umoh, S.U., 2022, 'Dilemmas of public participation in policymaking in South Africa', *Studia Polityki Publicznej* 9(4), 9–27. <https://doi.org/10.33119/KSzPP/2022.4.1>
- Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development, 2016, *Cash crisis, bond notes, and the Zimbabwe's economy: The real problem*, UECM, Zimbabwe.
- Zondi, S.I., 2015, *Public participation and service delivery with particular reference to iLembe District Municipality*, School of Management, IT and Governance, College of Law and Management Studies, The University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.