Participation in local economic development: Insights from Benoni, South Africa

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Background: Community participation in democratic societies cannot be overstated, as it is a fundamental pillar that allows community members to have a voice in economic, social, and political discourse.

Aim: This article investigated the significance of community participation in LED, identifying the barriers and drivers of community involvement to provide recommendations to enhance and promote greater community engagement in Benoni, South Africa.

Methods: The study adopted a mixed methods research approach. It conducted (n = 280) surveys from residents and (n = 5) in-depth interviews with municipal officials regarding the role of community participation in LED.

Results: The findings reveal five challenges to community participation: limited avenues for participation, a lack of confidence in leadership, lack of action on residents’ suggestions, limited understanding of the value and importance of participation, and lack of trust in local leadership. However, the study also established that community participation is crucial to LED and contributes to providing legitimacy to local government projects, ensuring leadership accountability and better trust in leadership, and to ascertain that residents affect changes they want to see in their communities.

Conclusion: The study concludes that community participation is vital for successful LED in Benoni. Addressing the challenges identified can lead to more effective and sustainable development initiatives.

Contribution: This research makes several contributions to the field of LED and community development. It emphasises enabling and encouraging community participation in shaping LED. The study’s insights into the barriers and drivers of community involvement provide a foundation for designing targeted interventions to enhance participation.

Keywords: community participation; local economic development; challenges; interventions; municipality.

Introduction

The role of community participation in enhancing local economic development (LED) is of utmost importance as it strengthens accountability and transparency, creating trust between municipal leaders and community members. The South African Constitution (1996) encourages local municipalities to work with local people as part of their commitment to democracy. Commenting on the importance of community participation, Biljohn and Luës (2020) establish many benefits for local governments that work with their community members. For example, working with community members can symbolise a healthy relationship and political stability where community members trust their elected leaders to deliver on issues that affect their communities. Moreover, the relationship also confirms the trust between local municipalities and community members (Boeckmann & Tyler 2002). Biljohn and Luës (2020) argue that community members’ involvement in LED is a sign of a strong democracy because it ensures accountability and transparency, which are strong principles of good governance and democracy. Thus, municipalities consulting and working with local members are crucial for any society committed to democracy and good governance. Using Benoni, South Africa, as a case study, the study examines the importance of community participation in LED. It also explores the factors that hinder or facilitate community participation in LED and provides recommendations for enhancing community participation in LED initiatives in Benoni.

Despite the importance of community members in LED, most municipalities have needed help to work with their community members. Msenge and Nzewi (2021) argue that the failure of...
municipalities to uphold community participation may be interpreted as a failure by municipalities to commit to democracy because community participation and deliberation are important pillars of democracy. It is, therefore, important to explore the factors that hinder local governments from working with their local communities as part of their constitutional mandate. Scholars such as Msenge and Nzewi (2021) identify issues such as political representation, power struggles, and political party affiliations as major obstacles preventing local municipalities from working closely with members of their communities. Moreover, a lack of good governance and transparency in government can also spread to local municipalities, resulting in a lack of interest in engaging community members so as to avoid accountability. In sum, because of political and individual interests municipalities ignore community members despite the advantages associated with citizen participation in local planning.

This study argues that citizen participation is important for local municipalities because it enhances democracy and accountability, which is good for the success of LED and reduces protests against service delivery. However, the study acknowledges that local municipalities in South Africa continue to neglect community members in planning LED and other projects that directly affect their community members. Therefore, it examines the importance of community participation in LED in Benoni, South Africa. It explains in-depth, statistical insights on the factors that hinder or facilitate community participation in LED and provides recommendations for enhancing community participation in LED initiatives. From the discussed insights, possible intervention mechanisms that can be exploited to enhance community participation and strengthen the relationship between local municipalities and their community members are highlighted. Overall, the objectives of the study are as follows:

1. to identify the importance of community participation in LED for local municipalities
2. to explore the factors that hinder or facilitate community participation in LED
3. to explore the measures useful for improving community participation in LED.

Study context

The study was conducted within the Benoni area, part of the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality in Gauteng province, South Africa. Recent population estimates have placed the population figures for Benoni at 729 952 (All Populations 2021). Benoni is a town that is bordered to the west by OR Tambo International Airport and Kempton Park, Boksburg to the South West, Brakpan to the South, and the province of Mpumalanga to the West. Some areas under Benoni include Daveyton, Etwatwa, Benoni Central, Northmead, and Rynfield. The town falls under the City of Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality. According to Kusambiza-Kiingi (2019), Ekurhuleni is one of the areas that has recently been hit by successive service delivery protests motivated partly by the limited community consultation in development. As a result, the study targeted the Benoni area of Ekurhuleni to evaluate issues concerning community participation in development.

Literature review

This section presents a comprehensive review of the existing literature, highlighting key studies and insights on policy and legislative frameworks for community participation in LED, factors affecting participation, and measures that can enhance community participation to make it work. There is a vast literature on citizen, public and community participation; while there may be a tendency to see these terms as similar, there are some nuanced differences. For instance, citizen participation is narrower as it confines public participation strictly to a country’s citizens. Community participation presents a more grassroots nuance to the definition. Hence, this study focussed more on public participation as a community practice, intending to unpack grassroots elements that emanate from community participation. In this article, public participation and community participation are used interchangeably.

Policy and legislative framework for community participation

South Africa’s unique history of apartheid and racial exclusion is important in understanding the concept of community participation. After apartheid, the new government was determined to create an inclusive community at the national, provincial, and local district levels (Miraftab & Wills 2005). To create this inclusive and democratic society, different legislative and policy frameworks were put in place. Molepo, Maleka and Khalo (2015) explain that a plethora of important pieces of legislation encourage, some even prescribe, the participation of communities in the affairs of their municipality. The three main legislative frameworks to be explored are the Constitution, the Systems Act of 2000, and the Municipal Structures Act, 117 of 1998 (hereafter the Structures Act). To guarantee a vibrant and inclusive society, the South African Constitution focusses heavily on public engagement, democracy, and accountability. These values are reflected in several constitutional clauses that support increasing the participation of citizens in national decision-making. Most crucially, the constitution ensures that every South African citizen has the right to participate in politics. Every adult citizen is guaranteed the right to vote in free and fair elections, allowing them to actively impact the make-up of the government. This democratic concept ensures that the national government reflects the people’s wishes. In addition, this political right exists at the municipal level, where community members are entitled to participate in issues that affect their communities.

The Municipal Structures Act 117 of 1998

In South Africa, the Municipal Structures Act 117 of 1998 is essential for fostering community participation at the local
government level. According to the Act, municipalities must set up systems and procedures for meaningful interaction between the community and the municipality. The Act requires the creation of ward committees and other democratic organisations, ensuring that residents have a forum in which to express their concerns, participate in decision-making, and hold local municipal officials responsible. The Act intends to improve municipal governance’s openness, diversity, and responsiveness by giving communities more authority to shape their neighbourhoods and actively impact municipal policies and choices.

**Municipal Systems Act (No. 32 of 2000)**

In South Africa, the Municipal Systems Act (No. 32 of 2000) strongly emphasises citizen input throughout local government decision-making. The Act creates a framework that encourages and governs citizen involvement at the municipal level. Municipalities must implement policies and practices that allow fruitful community interaction and are required by the Act to create and implement a public involvement policy. The methods and procedures for interacting with locals, groups, and other stakeholders are described in this policy. It guarantees that residents can participate in the creation, execution, and evaluation of municipal policies, programmes, and budgets.

**Community participation in local economic development**

Municipalities are mandated to deliver services to their communities. Therefore, they must constantly seek economic development projects that benefit the members of their communities. One way of achieving this goal is to ensure that they collaborate with community members during the planning and developmental phase of economic projects and policies that affect their communities. Thus, community participation in LED is crucial for fostering inclusive and sustainable growth. According to Moschidis and Ismyrlik (2018), when community members actively shape their local economy, they contribute to its resilience and ensure that development initiatives meet their needs and aspirations.

Community participation also brings diverse perspectives and local knowledge to decision-making (Kumagai & Lorio 2020). It allows individuals to voice their concerns, share ideas, and collaborate on solutions that address specific challenges faced by their community. This bottom-up approach helps to identify economic opportunities, leverage local resources, and build on the existing strengths (Moschidis & Ismyrlik 2018). In other words, the bottom-up approach is a good example of deliberative or direct democracy, where citizens are not passive but participative in economic issues affecting their communities.

Community participation creates a bond between community leaders and members, creating a peaceful community that is unlikely to use protests against service delivery (Wade & Demb 2009). This is because community members will be updated on their leaders’ progress and challenges and sometimes seek solutions from community suggestions. This gives community members a sense of power as they feel important and valued. According to Quick and Bryson (2022) and Torbing and Ansell (2022), once community members begin to refer to local authorities as one of them, a true sense of democracy and trust is created. Therefore, such community members are likely to support the long-term initiatives from their local municipalities to achieve their shared prosperity.

Moreover, when community members are involved in planning their local businesses, they must continue to be consulted in the implementation and evaluation phases to effectively utilise the strengths of participation (Axelsson, Melin & Lindgren 2010). This cooperative strategy guarantees that development programmes reflect local values, encourage inclusivity, and produce substantial and long-lasting benefits for all parties involved.

**Factors affecting community participation in local development initiatives**

Community participation is important for enhancing democracy in South Africa. However, several positive and negative factors affect community participation. According to Fung (2015), the ability of governments to involve their local communities in development is constrained by various other obstacles, such as perceived high levels of corruption, even while some elements, such as transparent governance, encourage community participation in development. Neshkova and Kalesnikaite (2019) conducted a study in Latin America to examine the impact of corruption on the participation of communities in politics and development of issues. Their study concludes that corruption negatively impacts participation as citizens withdraw from activities such as voting, citing high corruption as the reason why they believe their contributions would not be taken into consideration by political leaders.

A lack of effective leadership can also negatively impact participation across different communities. A study by Fung (2015) indicates that public perception of political leadership is important. The study indicates that once the public perceives their political leadership as poor and ineffective, they are less likely to participate in government-related issues. Instead, they are more likely to voice their frustrations through political protests against poor service delivery and incompetent leadership. Furthermore, Kusambiza-Kiingi (2019) connects low levels of participation within a community to ineffective local government management and stretched resources that don’t keep up with demand. Even worse, the study discovered that a lack of systematic approaches, bureaucratic procedures, and government personnel who lacked enthusiasm in seeing projects and processes through to completion because of their low understanding are the main causes of public engagement failures (Kusambiza-Kiingi 2019). Thus, public participation for most participants exists on article and is impractical because the process only involves leaders informing the public of what has been implemented and what has not.
without consulting with community members in the planning, implementation and evaluation phases. Thus, according to Waweru (2015), to increase public involvement levels, local governments should create design strategies that place less emphasis on immediate rewards and expectations and more on enforcing ownership and responsibility as the primary drivers of participation.

Interventions for enhancing community participation

Community participation in LED is important as it ensures growth and sustainable development. Municipalities that want to improve their service delivery must prioritise community participation by educating their community members on the various channels they can use to raise their concerns and work closely with their local leaders (Reddy & Sikkakane 2008). Municipalities can also educate citizens on the municipality’s overall operations and upcoming trends. This public engagement helps to reduce unnecessary conflicts in local communities. Giving communities a vote in the scope and calibre of the public services they get and, if practicable, a choice in the services supplied is one of the eight Batho Pele principles for South Africa (South African Government 1997). The importance of community participation requires municipalities to develop more strategies to enhance community participation.

Using case studies of the Makhado and Ekurhuleni municipalities as a basis, Kusambiza-Kiingi (2019) assesses South Africa’s initiatives for fostering public engagement. According to Kusambiza-Kiingi (2019), municipalities that involve citizens in the budgeting process see higher levels of public engagement. The study also finds that including council members, traditional leaders, and representative community people enhances participation rates in ward committees. The South African Local Government Association (SALGA) released 18 more guidelines in 2013 to improve the effectiveness of public participation in the nation.

One of the chosen key interventions is to include members of the public in oversight committees, engage local interest groups in communities, provide resources for enhancing participation by investing in funds, institutional systems, personnel dedicated to public participation, ensure ward-based planning, feedback systems to and from communities, include local traditional leaders, and formally publish municipal documents (SALGA 2013). The key conclusion from this literature review on the intervention strategies for raising participation levels is that the local government should carry out most interventions. Combating corruption, raising accountability standards, and involving community leaders and representative organisations are some tactics that can be used.

How to make public participation work through community participation lenses?

Public participation as a broader concept can benefit from the literature review on community participation lenses at the global level to maximise the search for strategies that can make public participation work in most societies. Drawing from the literature on a global perspective, it is important to understand what works for public participation as it serves as lessons that can be learned from this study. Reviewing the research conducted by Van Holm (2019), it is possible to see how, internationally, income inequality may affect urban residents’ civic engagement. The author looks at how several types of civic engagement, such as political participation, community involvement, and informal participation, are impacted by wealth inequality. These form part of effective community participation strategies at the grassroots level. Therefore, one of the most important lessons to make public participation work is to promote a community participation approach whereby we reduce the inequality gap between the rich and the poor so that they have the same interests when participating in LED projects.

According to Van Holm’s (2019) study, people who live in cities with more wealth disparity may face several social and economic obstacles that restrict their access to opportunities and resources for civic engagement, which lowers their involvement in public life and decision-making processes. South Africa can benefit from lessons on reducing the inequality gap between the rich and poor. The country is one of those with the highest wealth inequality gaps. This is down to the country’s history of apartheid that segregated people along racial lines (Miraftab & Wills 2005). According to Corporate Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) (2020), almost 31% of the citizens in Ekurhuleni are unemployed and live in poverty. Public participation becomes a futile activity as majority of residents are preoccupied with job hunting, they view public participation as an elite process. Thus, marginalised societies in South Africa continue to struggle with civic engagement and use protests as a means of public participation. Policymakers attempting to improve public participation in cities such as Ekurhuleni can start by addressing economic inequality to enhance public participation.

Lessons for encouraging public engagement can be learned from Wang et al.’s (2019) study on public attitudes and acceptance of nuclear energy in China. The study demonstrates how increasing public awareness, reducing perceived risks, integrating stakeholders, and customising public participation efforts locally can improve public engagement in decision-making processes. Thus, South Africa and other countries can take lessons on increasing public awareness as an important ingredient of enhancing public participation.

Theoretical framework

The study uses Arnstein’s (1969) theory of the ladder of citizen and/or public participation to understand the concept of public participation and how it functions. The ladder of participation is a theory that looks at the power dynamics of citizen participation and decision-making, ranging from low to high. For example, participation can be through various forms, but each determines the participants’ power level. The theory, therefore, divides participation into two parts: one

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that is derived by participants and one that local leaders derive. Participation activities such as manipulation and informing the community without taking their feedback are some examples of activities reducing public power (Masiya, Mazenda & Davids 2019).

On the other hand, activities such as consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, and citizen power resemble public power in participation (Van Holm 2019). Although each level of participation is useful, the study acknowledges levels of participation that resembles public power, such as consultation and partnership. This type of public participation can drive more community members to participate if they believe that municipal leaders consider their contributions when deliberating on LED projects. Figure 1 sums up the different levels or types of public participation.

Arnstein’s theory helps to explain all types and levels of citizen participation. For example, the theory is useful in pointing out levels of public participation that can be problematic in community participation processes. The theory acknowledges that minimal participation is generally caused by local authorities failing to adopt a bottom-up approach. Instead, authorities resort to manipulation and informing citizens of their decisions instead of consulting with them. This can result in local citizens being demotivated from participating as they anticipate their contributions will not be considered. The challenge with this approach is that it undermines deliberative democracy and citizens resort to violent protests to express their concerns. On the other hand, the bottom-up approach is most suitable if local authorities resort to methods such as consultation, partnership and delegated power to allow community members to participate in the planning, implementation and evaluation phases. This approach is recommended throughout the study as it motivates community members to participate, creating trust between local authorities and community members.

Research methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods approach to gather the data. This means we utilised both quantitative and qualitative research approaches to collect data. Quantitative research was useful for analysing numerical data obtained through methods such as questionnaires (Babbie & Mouton 2011), while qualitative research was used to answer non-numerical data and broad questions such as what, when and how, which are best for understanding human behaviour (Babbie & Mouton 2011).

Participants

The population of this study consists of residents of Benoni and municipal officials working in LED units in Benoni. The study conducted (n = 280) surveys from randomly selected residents and (n = 5) in-depth interviews from purposively sampled municipal officials regarding the role of community participation in LED.

Instruments

The study used two research instruments to collect data. The first was a carefully created questionnaire to answer the study’s objective. The researcher distributed the questionnaires to residents of Benoni to answer. The questionnaires were divided into five sections. Section A focused on understanding the level of community participation in LED in the Benoni Area, South Africa. Closed-ended questions were used to guide this section. Section B sought to understand the challenges affecting community participation in LED in the Benoni area. This section relied on a five-point Likert scale of responses. Section C aimed to understand the importance of community participation in LED in the Benoni area. Section D focused on the interventions needed to enhance community participation in LED in the Benoni area, and finally, Section E focused on demographic information such as age group and gender. The second instrument used to collect in-depth data was interviewing. These interviews were face-to-face with city officials to understand their opinions on the importance of community participation in LED in their area.

Data analysis

The study presented quantitative findings through descriptive statistics, which allowed the researcher to display data in tabular form. Statistical programmes such as Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) were also used to analyse the quantitative data. On the other hand, thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data, where interviews were transcribed and presented according to their themes.

Presentation of results

Importance of community participation

The study results established that community participation is important for local municipalities. Scholars such as Patel and Gibbon (2017) identify various ways that the importance of community participation can be enjoyed, for example, strengthening democratic principles such as accountability.
and transparency. Similarly, the Table 1 confirms the importance of community participation by asking participants whether they either strongly disagree, disagree, are neutral, agree or strongly agree.

Firstly, the results in the Table 1 show that 31.2% of the participants agree, and 42.7% strongly agree that local government projects are likely to succeed if they have community buy-in. Secondly, the results show that 29.9% of the participants agree, while 42.7% strongly agree that community participation gives community members a chance to keep their government accountable. Thirdly, 30.8% of the participants agree, while 23.1% strongly agree that community participation in LED promotes trust between municipal authorities and community members. Overall, 67.0% of the participants in the Benoni district affirm that citizen participation is of utmost importance.

Challenges of community participation

Despite the importance of community participation in promoting good governance and democracy, there are many challenges affecting it, such as corruption and political affiliations (Neshkova & Kalesnikite 2019). Similarly, the study’s results in Table 2 show various challenges preventing the community members from participating in LED.

Using a five-point Likert scale, Table 2 shows that 18.8% of the participants agree, while 20.1% strongly agree with the statement that they do not trust their local leaders. Similarly, 42.3% of the participants agree, while 20.1% strongly agree with the notion that their suggestions are not taken into consideration by municipal officials. Furthermore, 45.3% of the participants agree, while 22.6% strongly agree that they do not have confidence in the municipal authorities’ ability to take their concerns seriously. Moreover, 42.7% of the participants agree, while 27.8% strongly agree that the government has not opened enough avenues to allow citizens to express their concerns effectively. Finally, 41.9% of the participants agree, while 18.85% do not understand public participation and its benefits. Overall, over 60.0% of the participants confirm various challenges affecting community participation in the district of Benoni in South Africa.

Intervention mechanism

To address the aforesaid challenges and improve citizen participation, Moschidis and Ismyrlis (2018) recommend that authorities minimise the inhibitors of participation and maximise the drivers instead. The study identified intervention mechanisms that can enhance community participation, as summarised in Table 3.

Using a five-point Likert scale, Table 3 shows that 50.0% of the participants agree while 44.4% strongly agree that local municipalities must consider the public’s input on issues such as budgeting. Similarly, 41.0% of the participants agree, while 49.6% strongly agree that local municipalities must work closely with civil society groups. In addition, 42.7% of the participants agree, while 50.0% strongly agree with the importance of creating easy channels for community members to report service delivery challenges. Moreover, 29.5% of the participants agree, while 65.0% strongly agree that improving service delivery is the first step to minimising public participation challenges. To achieve this goal, 23.5% of the participants agree, while 56.8% strongly agree that corruption must be reduced for public authorities to be accountable. Overall, 91.0% of the Benoni participants agree on the above-mentioned measures’ effectiveness in improving citizen participation.

Qualitative findings

In-depth interviews were conducted with municipal officials to understand their opinions on the importance of community participation, ways to improve participation, challenges affecting participation and intervention mechanisms that can enhance community participation in Benoni. Table 4 sums up the results from the participants.
The given results show that there are different ways that participants can use to participate and contribute to issues that directly affect their communities. These include municipal-led programmes such as Imbizo. These findings align with Gibbon (2017), who argues that the government should be at the forefront of exploring new ways to allow participants to participate in issues affecting their communities easily. The findings from municipal officials also indicate that community participation is important for building trust and promoting social cohesion. Despite the importance of community participation, it faces challenges such as a lack of trust and limited knowledge of the available channels for participation. Therefore, intervention mechanisms to enhance participation are needed. Most municipal officials pointed out that educating citizens on the importance of participating and on the available avenues such as Imbizo is important.

Moreover, councillors should hold community meetings during weekends and late hours to allow most citizens to attend the meetings. In sum, the findings from municipal officials show that community participation is important for transparency, social cohesion, and advancing democracy. These findings align with those of Neshkova and Kalesnaike (2019), who argue that municipalities must encourage public participation because it upholds democratic principles such as accountability and transparency.

**Discussion**

**The role of citizen participation in local economic development in Benoni**

The study’s results affirm that citizen participation in Benoni is important for local municipalities for several reasons. Firstly, public participation is a symbol of a strong democracy. Hence, municipalities that respect public opinions must be celebrated as upholders of democratic principles such as accountability and transparency (Moschidis & Ismyrlis 2018). Secondly, the study establishes that citizen participation in LED benefits local municipalities. Municipal authorities singled out trust as the benefit of community participation that engages people at the grassroots level. They argued that when municipal authorities genuinely engage with the public, for example, through IDP debates, they can create a bond with the public, reporting municipal challenges, and possible outcomes. This aligns with Arnstein’s ladder of public participation, which prioritises partnerships between municipal officials and community members. Community participation creates transparency, reducing corruption and improving service delivery. The findings resonate with the views of Patel and Gibbon (2017), who argue that when the government initiates public inclusion, trust can be created between municipal officials and community members, resulting in improved service delivery.

**Challenges of community participation in Benoni**

Despite the importance of community participation in upholding the values of democracy, creating trust and improving service delivery, the study identifies that municipalities do not engage their community members enough in LED projects that directly affect their communities. This danger was highlighted by Arnstein’s ladder of public participation, which discourages a top-down approach in favour of a bottom-up approach. One of the biggest challenges to community participation in Benoni is limited peaceful avenues for community members to participate in issues that directly affect their communities. Kusambiza-Kiingi (2019) acknowledges that the lack of avenues is down to a lack of awareness among community members and a lack of effort from municipal officials to reach out. If unaddressed, this often results in community members resorting to protests to express their concerns.

The study also establishes that a lack of trust between municipal officials and community members is a major
challenge to community participation in Benoni. Corruption among municipal officials and bribery issues discourage community members from participating in government activities (Neshkova & Kalesnikaite 2019). The findings confirm that most participants do not have faith in the ability of the government to take their concerns seriously; hence, they opt not to waste their time trying to raise their concerns. A lack of education has also played a role, as some participants are unaware that they have a right to share their concerns through a deliberative process instead of protests. This aligns with Fung’s (2015) findings, which show that a lack of leadership could result in a lack of effort to educate the public and create avenues for public participation. It is, therefore, important to examine the possible intervention measures that can be used to address the challenges to citizen participation.

Intervention measures enhancing community participation in Benoni
According to Fung (2015), improving community participation in LED requires a robust intervention mechanism that can help build back the trust between municipal officials and their community members. This is supported by Kusambiza-Kiingi (2019), who argues that the government should take the first initiative to develop measures to improve community participation. The study establishes that the government should play a significant role in improving community participation in Benoni. Moreover, participants highlighted the need for councillors in Benoni to set meetings on convenient days such as weekends to allow most citizens to attend. These are the types of intervention mechanisms supported by Arnstein’s ladder of public participation, which promotes partnership and empowerment of citizens. This explains why participants argued that the government should consult with representatives such as community leaders in cases where community members are not always available to participate in LED projects. The findings of the study are, therefore, in line with Kusambiza-Kiingi (2019), who identified different important drivers of citizen participation, such as regular requests for resident inputs, engaging communities through civil society groups, improving the ease of participating, improving service delivery, and curbing corruption levels in the municipality.

Conclusion
The study acknowledges that community participation in South Africa remains low despite the availability of the constitution and other legislative mechanisms that command local government to prioritise community participation. Using a case study of Benoni, the study sought to understand why community participation remains low in South Africa. Different reasons were identified, such as a lack of participation avenues for community members, a lack of education and knowledge among community members, and a lack of trust in municipal officials to take seriously the concerns raised by community members. However, despite these challenges, the study identifies that community members and municipal officials agree that community participation is important for local governments. Local municipalities that value community participation can benefit from improving their quality of service delivery and reducing violent protests from community members. Moreover, trust can be created between community members and government officials, leading to good governance. In brief, community participation is of the utmost importance because it symbolises participatory democracy by representing democratic values such as accountability and transparency, which can ultimately lead to reduced corruption and the success of LED.

Given the importance of community participation in LED projects and the challenges surrounding it, it is important to develop intervention measures that can mend the broken trust between municipal officials and community members. Fung (2015) argues that the government should take the first initiative to reach out by creating easy channels for community members to participate in matters that directly affect them. This is because most participants identified improved service delivery through effective community engagement and participation as the yardstick of a healthy community that works closely with its members and values their opinions during public meetings. Therefore, the study recommends that local municipalities improve service delivery because it is a prerequisite for effective public participation. However, other factors can influence community participation apart from service delivery. Therefore, future research can explore those additional factors apart from service delivery. Moreover, community members need to feel valued by making them trust that municipal officials always consider their opinions. Acting in this manner will be a huge step towards exercising democratic principles and respecting the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, which mandates local governments to engage their community members in matters that directly affect them.

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

Authors’ contributions
N.P.M. contributed to the body of knowledge by conducting a pure research and obtaining the results. N.P.M. used the research results to formulate the articles based on the research done. J.N.M. supervised the work and provided guidance throughout the research study.

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Data availability
Raw data are stored in a protected folder for ethical and security reasons. The raw dataset in SPSS however, can be made available when required for verification.

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