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Social Accountability in the Ngqushwa Local Municipality Based on Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation:

A Citizen's Perspective

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Abstract

This study assessed citizen participation in social accountability mechanisms within the Ngqushwa Local Municipality using Arnstein's Ladder of Participation as a theoretical lens. This study uses a qualitative research design, incorporating structured interviews with 12 participants from Ngqushwa Local Municipality and data analysed thematically. The findings indicate that citizen participation is largely tokenistic, characterised by low levels of engagement and a significant disconnect between citizen involvement and actual municipal decision-making. Specifically, citizen participation mostly occurs in the lower rung of Arnstein's ladder (tokenism), such as informing, consultation, and placation, reflecting a limited impact on policy and service delivery outcomes. The Municipality must move beyond mere token engagement and foster deliberative, transparent, and empowering processes in which citizens are not just informed but actively involved in shaping local policies and service delivery. This includes empowering ward committees, enhancing transparency in public meetings, and reforming participatory budgeting to ensure that public input is meaningfully integrated into final decisions. The research findings will contribute towards the development of robust social accountability mechanisms, promoting a more profound and genuine form of citizen participation that is adaptable and applicable to other municipalities within and beyond South African borders.

Keywords

Citizen participation, Municipality, Social accountability, Arnstein's ladder of participation, Imbizo, Ward Committee, Participatory budgeting, Integrated Development Plan

INTRODUCTION

Social accountability, is increasingly recognised as a means to improve municipal performance and service delivery (Brinkerhoff & Wetterberg, 2016; Schaaf et al., 2017). It is essential at municipal level as it fosters communication, ensures accountability, mutual understanding, empowerment, generates trust and coordination of efforts between citizens and local authorities (Khodary, 2021). Work on social accountability in the past two decades reveals that it improves service delivery, and generates trust in municipal governments by enabling direct citizen participation with municipal officials, safeguarding against misuse of local discretion (Yilmaz et al., 2008).

However, recent scholarship has shown that social accountability at municipal level is trapped if citizens are given a cameo role in local decision-making processes by officials avoiding threats to existing power structures,

ultimately reinforcing clientelism (Vuković & Babović, 2018). Masiya et al. (2019) contend that municipal officials are hesitant to share decision-making powers with citizens, holding that it is their role and they have unfettered ability to invent “the best solution”. While numerous scholars have focused on the benefits of social accountability, and the steps that municipalities can take to integrate it, past research has paid much less attention to the extent to which adopted social accountability mechanisms are meaningfully integrated into municipal decision-making processes. To expand our understanding of this phenomenon, our study examines citizen participation in social accountability mechanisms within the Ngqushwa Local Municipality using Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation as a theoretical lens.

We adopt the definition of social accountability proposed by Camargo and Jacobs (2013) and Lister and Sadasivam (2010) which describes “social accountability” as a variety of mechanisms, formal and informal, through which citizens express their preferences, opinions and views and demand accountability from municipal power-holders.

This study focuses on social accountability in the South African context because of its increasing relevance to municipal governance and the need to solve persistent service delivery challenges. Despite the increasing adoption of social accountability mechanisms at municipal level, the extent to which they empower citizens in decision-making is attracting growing debate. Kanyane et al. (2020) argue that, while the importance of the relationship between social accountability and citizen participation is widely acknowledged as important, the nuances that inform such a relationship are not critically discussed.

Our central objectives are to assess the level of citizen participation in social accountability mechanisms within Ngqushwa Local Municipality, based on the Einstein Ladder of Participation, and explore ways to improve social accountability in the municipality. We believe this study offers several contributions to the literature. First, we complement past studies that have tended to concentrate on the benefits of social accountability (United Nations Development Programme, 2013; Camargo, 2016; and Shava and Hofisi, 2021), rather than the extent to which adopted social accountability mechanisms are meaningfully integrated into municipal decision-making processes. Drawing on Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation, we show that in the context of four social accountability mechanisms used by Ngqushwa Local Municipality, namely the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), Ward Committees, Imbizos and participatory budgeting, citizen participation mostly occurs in the lower rung of the ladder (tokenism), exemplified by informing, consultation, and placation, reflecting a limited impact on policy and service delivery outcomes.

Second, our research illustrates how social accountability is deployed in practice in the case study municipality depending on the type of mechanism, resulting in variations on the impact of citizen participation and decision outcomes. This complements past studies that have examined the supposed effects of different social accountability mechanisms in other contexts. Our results provide insights into how in practice, municipal officials in Ngqushwa local municipality influence citizen perspectives. This provides an interesting extension to past work that has assumed implementing social accountability mechanisms results in citizen driven decision making at municipal level.

Finally, our study further contributes to Arnstein’s ladder of participation theory, by confirming the characteristics of the bottom steps that show the least amount of participation while the top steps show increased public participation. This can be utilised as a guide to observe who has power when important decisions are made in the context of social accountability at municipal level.

This paper is structured as follows. The first section introduces the topic and identifies the research question. The second section, the conceptualisation of social accountability at the municipal level, provides an in-depth definition of social accountability and discusses its importance in a municipality. The background of social accountability in South Africa explains the circumstances that make social accountability necessary. Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation is a theoretical section in which the researcher explains in greater depth the theory underpinning the study. The research methodology section provides a step-by-step approach to how the researcher can find answers to the research questions. Social accountability in the Ngqushwa Local Municipality section presents the research results and discussion followed by conclusions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study used Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation to evaluate social accountability within the Ngqushwa Local Municipality. Arnstein’s (1969) ladder has eight levels of participation. Figure 1 below shows the eight levels of participation developed by Arnstein.

Starting at the bottom, the first category is non-participation, which has two levels of participation. The first level is manipulation. Arnstein (1969) and Botchwey et al. (2019) postulated that at the manipulation level, while public participation is pronounced, it does not occur in practice. The decision-making process is manipulative and imposed on citizens, with outcomes predetermined by the municipalities. The second level is therapy, where public participation is a “feel-good” exercise (therapy) meant to cure or educate the participants. Gaber (2019) argues that, at this level, citizens’ focus on essential issues is diverted to “less important” issues in most instances. Botchwey et al. (2019) argued that at this level, citizens are inactive recipients of municipal decisions.

The second category on the ladder of citizen participation is tokenism. It has three levels, namely informing, consulting, and placation (Arnstein, 1969). Taylor (2003) posits that at the informing level, municipal officials inform citizens of what they are about to do. This is a one-way flow of information. There is no provision for channels of feedback. With regards to consultation, it is characterised by processes such as attitude surveys, neighbourhood meetings and public enquiries but remains a weak form of participation and is often another window dressing exercise (Nomdo et al., 2019).

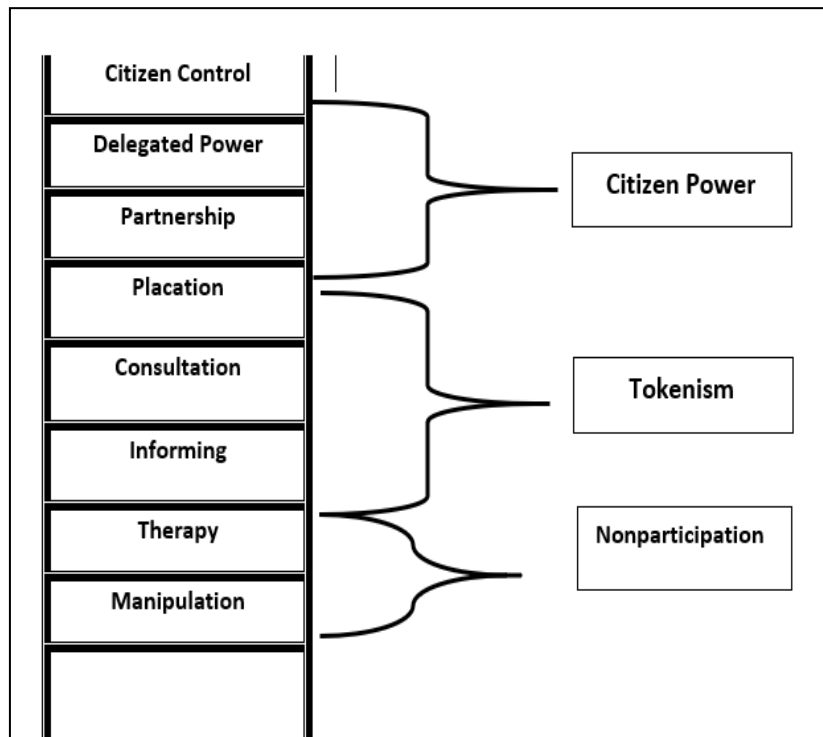


Fig. 1 Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation
Source: Arnstein, 1969

The placation level involves powerholders allowing citizen participation in the planning process. However, officials judge the feasibility of their advice (Gaber, 2019). Mpabanga (2022) argues that at the placation level, a few members within the community are handpicked and appointed to serve in different committees to calm down community members and make it seem as if their issues are being considered.

The third category is citizen power, comprising three levels of participation: partnership, delegated power, and citizen control (Arnstein, 1969). Partnership is the level, in which power is redistributed between public officials and citizens through negotiation. Planning and decision-making responsibilities are shared, for example, through joint committees. At the delegated power level, citizens occupy the majority of seats on committees with delegated decision-making authority, giving them the power to ensure programmes are accountable to them (Gaber, 2019). It is worth noting that this is the only level at which public officials and citizens are at the same level, but citizens have a veto if the negotiation fails. The last level is citizen control, in which citizens have developed control and power over the municipality's actions. Citizens manage the entire task of planning, policymaking and administering programmes.

In summary, the eight levels of citizen participation on the ladder of participation can be grouped into three broad categories. The first category involves nonparticipation, where decisions are made at the top and imposed on citizens. The second category reflects participation through informing and consulting citizens, but without guaranteeing that their input will influence decisions. The third and most ideal category involves full citizen participation in decision-making, where they become partners with the ability to directly shape policy formulation and implementation. Within the context of this study, Arnstein Ladder serves as the foundation element shaping the research focus, methodology, analysis, and recommendations of the study. The ladder provides a comprehensive and theoretically grounded assessment of citizen participation practices and their implications for effective social accountability mechanisms.

Conceptualising social accountability

Knox (2018) states that social accountability is an approach aimed at ensuring accountability through citizen participation. According to Boydell et al. (2019), social accountability is regarded as a process aimed at empowering service users (citizens) to voice their needs, make claims to their rights, and hold those responsible for providing essential services to account. It is worth noting that social accountability aims to enhance the delivery of services through participatory processes. Based on the above definitions, this study defines social accountability as a citizen-driven process through which citizens express their preferences, opinions and views and demand accountability from municipal powerholders.

Social accountability in South African municipalities is premised on improved service delivery. Shayamano (2020) postulates that municipal officials' accountability is the cornerstone of good government and a prerequisite for effective service delivery. Kuhlengisa (2021) posits that enhancing accountability at municipal level results in improved governance and effectiveness in service delivery.

Shava and Mubangizi (2019) ascertained that social accountability could reduce poverty by engendering a more pro-poor policy design and improved service delivery. This finding agrees with Boydell et al. (2019), who argued that social accountability mechanisms, in most instances, are meant for the poor, focusing on services that directly affect their

lives. Camargo (2016) supports these ideas by stipulating that social accountability initiatives have a greater possibility of serving the interests of vulnerable and marginalised groups such as indigents, women, children, and the disabled. Hamal et al. (2018) claimed that social accountability assists in empowering vulnerable groups within communities to express their needs and demand rights and better services, as well as changing the way municipal officials perceive such groups as genuine rights holders.

Social accountability in South Africa

In South Africa, the continued citizens' deprivation of basic services, including water, electricity, education, and health has led to calls to adopt social accountability as a mechanism to fight for better service delivery (Sidimba, 2021).

Implementing Social accountability mechanisms within the South African context is premised on several pieces of legislation. The South African Constitution (1996) stipulates the promotion of citizen participation. It requires municipalities to encourage the participation of citizens in the matters of local government. Specifically, Section 195, subsection 1 (e) states that "People's needs must be responded to, and the public must be encouraged to participate in policy-making". Section 152 of the Constitution calls on municipalities to provide democratic and accountable governments for local communities. In addition, the Municipal Finance Management Act of 2003, requires municipalities to be accountable to citizens for the decisions made throughout the year. Furthermore, the White Paper on Local Government affirms social accountability, at municipal level as it seeks to ensure that citizens give unfettered inputs into local decision-making processes. It instructs municipalities to be developmental in the provision of service delivery by committing to working with citizens.

The Municipal Systems Act of 2000 devoted Chapter 7 to citizen participation, mandating municipalities to develop mechanisms and procedures for promoting participation. It calls upon municipalities to develop a culture of citizen participation. In a bid to respond to the need for citizen participation, variations of Imbizos, were introduced, where municipal officials hold meetings with citizens. Shava and Mubangizi (2019) posited that this form of citizen participation is instrumental, as it takes the government to the people, where ordinary people can talk directly to municipal representatives.

The Municipal Structures Act (1998), along with the Municipal Systems Act (2000), mandates citizen consultations. The Municipal Structures Act (1998) specifically establishes participation mechanisms such as ward committees, which serve as a crucial connection between ward councillors, the citizens, and the municipality. These structures are intended to enable local citizens to influence planning in ways that best address their needs.

Sikhakane and Reddy (2011) argue that social accountability within the South African context has been exercised to enable citizens to participate in agenda setting for full council and committee meetings. It also promotes informal channels for citizen participation. Additionally, it allows citizens access to municipal background documents and activities to strengthen accountability.

Joshi (2017) posits that social accountability may vary in engagement types, from collaborative problem-solving to more adversarial approaches. Francetic et al. (2021) argue that this strategy builds a collective consensus based on a shared understanding of the problem.

South Africa uses various strategies to promote social accountability. A selected few are discussed below. Shava and Hofisi (2021) identified the Integrated Development Planning as a strategy employed by local governments to promote social accountability. Dlamini and Reddy (2018) believe that the IDP contributes to social accountability, as it seeks to reflect the priorities of the community members in the municipal budget. Asha and Makalela (2020) also indicate that a study conducted by the World Bank in 2006, assessing the IDP as a social accountability mechanism, revealed that it is used to produce citizen priorities as well as provide feedback platforms. Shava and Mubangizi (2019) argued that in South Africa, IDP consultations are regarded as an opportunity to lay service delivery grievances. Although the IDP is viewed as a vital tool for social accountability, its main weakness is that citizens' voices are not actively unequivocal due to limited participation, which reduces officials' accountability. This is in line with the findings of the United Nations Development Programme (2013), which revealed that, even though citizen participation is mandatory within the IDP, such participation is minimal.

According to Sidimba (2021), citizens use local government elections held every five years in South Africa as social accountability mechanisms. Through elections, citizens are empowered to demand services from those elected to be in power (Maphunye, 2016). Nkomo (2017) reiterates that local government elections are fundamental, as citizens obtain the opportunity to elect officials who wish to serve their interests in public service delivery. However, Dlamini (2021) cautions that elections fall short of effectiveness as a social accountability mechanism because they hold elected officials accountable but not the local bureaucracy.

In addition, Imbizos are also seen as a social accountability strategy employed by municipalities. Derived from a Zulu verb "biza" meaning "call (together)" or convene, hence an imbizo is a gathering (DPME 2023). Imbizo is a unique participatory platform that seeks to promote citizen participation within the local sphere and meaningful dialogue between the citizens and municipal officials (Gegana & Phahlane, 2024). Municipalities are responsible for setting Imbizo focus weeks to enable interactions between citizens and municipal officials (Baloyi & Lubinga, 2017). Notable from the literature on Imbizos, there tends to be a lack of empirical evidence suggesting that this platform prioritises citizen perspectives.

Furthermore, Ward committees are another social accountability mechanism used by municipalities. Mazenda and Masiya (2018) argue that ward committees are a powerful political tool for mobilising citizen support and enhancing the capacity of structures of community forums. However, Thornhill and Madumo (2011) posit that the contribution of ward committees as a social accountability mechanism is overrated, as their influence in holding the state accountable seems less influential.

Participatory budgeting, as a social accountability mechanism, is expected to facilitate citizen participation in the formulation and implementation of municipal budgets (Gooding, 2017). In participatory budgeting, citizens influence how municipal funds are allocated and spent (Kraai et al., 2023). Participatory budgeting fosters a sense of ownership among the population and strengthens their ability to hold public officials accountable for resource management and service delivery. It empowers communities by ensuring that their priorities are reflected in budgetary allocations, leading to a more equitable distribution of resources and a better alignment with local needs. Furthermore, participatory budgeting serves as a platform for civic engagement, allowing citizens to voice their concerns and monitor budget execution, thus reinforcing accountability mechanisms within the public sector. This practice exemplifies how social accountability can be operationalised through active citizen participation, ultimately contributing to more effective and transparent governance.

RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN

This study used a qualitative approach, as its main goal was to understand citizen perspectives regarding social accountability in the Ngqushwa local municipality based on Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation. Aspers and Corte (2019) argued that qualitative research is a multimethod involving an explanatory, naturalistic approach to the subject under investigation. In the context of this study, the use of a qualitative research approach is supported by the need to answer the research question regarding citizens' perspectives on their participation in social accountability in the Ngqushwa municipality.

A case study research design was adopted, and the Ngqushwa local municipality was used as a case study. The study population encompassed all people above 18 years of age who resided in the municipality. A convenience sampling technique was used to select 12 participants for this study.

The study used primary and secondary methods. Primary data were collected using in-depth interviews, which gave the researchers an in-depth understanding of citizens' perspectives regarding their participation in social accountability strategies within the municipality. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 12 residents of the Ngqushwa municipality.

On the other hand, the documents selected included municipal IDP, budgets, performance reports, audit reports, and annual reports from 2018 to 2022, as well as articles from 2017 to 2022. These documents were selected because they provide the most recent activities within the municipality that address the aims and objectives of the study. The website and other archives contain many documents and articles about Ngqushwa Local Municipality. The researchers chose documents and articles that helped them achieve the aims and objectives of the study. Data was analysed using thematic analysis, and four main themes were identified, which assisted in summarising the research findings and drawing conclusions.

STUDY AREA

The Ngqushwa Local Municipality (NLM) is one of six local municipalities in the Amathole District municipality in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The NLM consists of only two towns, Peddie and Hamburg, and a portion of King Williams town (Qonce) villages. The municipality has an estimated population of 66,227 people and an area of approximately 2245 km² (NLM Annual Report, 2021). The Blacks are most of the dwellers within the municipality; however, they are still confined to the areas reserved for Blacks by the apartheid government. Ninety five percent of people in NLM reside in rural areas, and only 5% live in urban areas. The municipality has implemented several initiatives to ensure interactions between municipal officials and community members. These include scorecards, where community members express dissatisfaction through the scoring process. In addition, the municipality has 13 wards, which translates into 13 ward committees responsible for representing their wards (Mafumbu, Zhou & Kalumba, 2022). The municipality's mayor regularly conducts an imbizo, where community members air their views on the issues that affect them. In addition, the IDP process within the municipality is regarded as another way that community members interact with municipal officials.

FINDINGS

This study aimed to examine social accountability mechanisms in the Ngqushwa Local Municipality using Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation. To this end, we employed a qualitative research approach with a sample size of 12 participants. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the collected data and develop the key themes of the study, focusing on social accountability. To determine the extent of citizen participation in social accountability mechanisms, respondents were asked to comment on their extent of participation in social accountability mechanisms, focusing on how effectively they are informed about decisions, how they were consulted, and feedback provided to assess the extent to which the citizens and the municipality collaborate in decision-making processes and the degree to which they influence these social accountability mechanisms. The findings for each social accountability mechanism are discussed below.

Citizen participation in the IDP processes

The findings reveal a limited level of citizen participation in the IDP process. For example, 11 out of 12 respondents reported that their participation had minimal to no influence on municipal decision-making, signified by a lack of access to information, lack of feedback, and skewed power dynamics in favour of municipal officials.

Respondents reported that their participation was characterised by poor dissemination of information prior to meetings, inconvenient scheduling that hinders attendance, and marginalisation of community input during discussions, where municipal officials often dominate. One participant highlighted the lack of transparency in the process:

“There is a lack of transparency in the IDP process, which undermines our ability to contribute to issues that affect us meaningfully. In most instances, meetings are held without information about the agenda, leaving community members unprepared to provide informed input. For example, community consultations are scheduled at inconvenient times, making it challenging for most people to attend, and this means that our voices are not heard and our contributions are sidelined.” (Participant 4)

Another participant expressed frustration over the lack of feedback on community suggestions:

“Although we are invited to provide input during IDP consultations, there is little to no feedback on how our suggestions are considered or integrated into the final plans. We often realise that decisions do not reflect the concerns raised during community meetings. This disconnect fosters a perception that our participation is merely a formality, rather than a genuine opportunity to influence local governance.” (Participant 11)

Power dynamics during the IDP process also emerged as a significant factor in limiting citizen participation. One respondent explained how these dynamics lead to the alienation of the citizen’s voice:

“During the IDP process, the existing power dynamics play a significant role in marginalising our contributions. Often, officials from the municipality dominate discussions, overshadowing the community’s voices. When we raise important issues, they are normally dismissed, and this power imbalance makes it difficult.”

Citizens participation in Ward Committees

Regarding citizen participation in Ward Committee meetings, the study findings revealed that citizens generally rubber-stamp decisions. Nine of the twelve participants revealed that their participation was only a formality.

One participant of the study highlighted the following.

“I normally attend these ward meetings to assist in making a difference, but I’ve become disillusioned. Our discussions are just lip service because the same issues come up meeting after meeting, yet nothing changes. It is exhausting to feel like we are just going in circles, and I am questioning whether my presence even matters. It’s disappointing to realise that our participation is just a way for them to appear engaged” (Participant 10).

Similarly, another participant indicated that.

“Joining these meetings, I needed to advocate for better resources for our community. However, it quickly became clear to me that participation in these meetings was nothing more than just a formality. This is so because ward councillors seem to have their minds made up even before we speak; our opinions are asked but I think they only want to tick the boxes to say they consulted the community. It is really painful to feel like we are going through the motions” (Participant 1).

Citizen participation in Imbizos

In African indigenous communities, imbizo is used as a platform to resolve pertinent community challenges through honest engagement between subjects and leadership. It is argued that, at face value, imbizo is a communication and governance model to deepen participatory democracy and public participation, especially for the poor, empowering them with information to become active citizens and take the lead in driving change. In assessing citizens’ involvement in imbizos, all participants reflected that their input was merely symbolic rather than substantive, highlighting that municipal officials delay in providing information prior to the meeting and dominate discussions at the imbizos.

Participants had the following to say;

“I feel like our imbizo is nothing more than a perfunctory gesture. They invite us to participate, but our opinions are often dismissed or ignored. I am sure that the leaders would have already made up their minds before the gathering even started. There is a need to challenge this culture of tokenism and demand real, meaningful participation” (Participant 3).

“It is painful to observe how our community leaders offer symbolic gestures without substance to the idea of inclusive decision-making. We are asked for our input during these public meetings, but such leaders proceed to implement their agenda regardless of what we say. Witnessing leaders offering only hollow

reassurances feels disheartening, leaving us feeling overlooked and undervalued. We must hold these leaders accountable and insist on a more transparent and democratic process". (Participant 8).

"In imbizo, the date, venue, time and agenda of the meeting is decided by the municipal officials and in most cases, they are used by the municipality as a platform for announcing their programme of action" (Participant 7)

Participation in participatory budgeting

The assessment of citizen participation in the participatory budgeting process reveals a significant disconnect between citizen engagement and the final budget outcomes. The findings suggest that, despite formal mechanisms for participation, citizen perspectives were minimally integrated into final budget decisions. Respondents indicated that municipal officials filtered citizen inputs, often undermining the intent of participatory budgeting to democratise the process.

In line with these observations, several participants expressed frustration with the process, emphasising the superficial nature of their involvement. One participant stated:

"I was over the moon to participate in Participatory Budgeting, hoping it would give our community a voice on how taxpayers' money is spent in the municipality. After going through the process, it was obvious that our participation and input were just for show. Municipal officials make the final decisions behind closed doors, and our proposals are often ignored or underfunded. It is disheartening to note that we do not have any actual power to shape the budget" (Participant 6).

This sentiment was echoed by others, who highlighted the discrepancy between their initial expectations of meaningful participation and eventual outcomes. For example, another participant noted,

"I attended the Participatory Budgeting meetings to advocate for much-needed infrastructure improvements in our community. However, after going through the entire process, I feel like the municipal officials were just using us. These municipal officials filtered and prioritised our ideas, and the final vote was more of a popularity contest than a real decision-making process. It is sad to see that our participation does not translate into tangible budget allocations" (Participant 1).

Such accounts reveal the perception that municipal officials retain disproportionate control over final budget decisions, thereby reducing citizen participation to a symbolic gesture rather than a substantive contribution. The participatory budgeting process, as described by the participants, appears to lack transparency and genuine power-sharing. As Participant 11 reflected:

"My involvement in the Participatory Budgeting process was aimed at amplifying the voices of young people within our community. However, after going through the process, it is clear that, as the youth, we do not have a real say in how the budget is allocated. We often propose things, and they are overshadowed by more vocal groups, mostly municipal officials or consultants. It is annoying to realise that our participation is more about the appearance of inclusion than actual decision-making power."

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to assess citizen participation in social accountability mechanisms within the Ngqushwa Local Municipality, using Arnstein's Ladder of Participation as a theoretical framework. The focus was on four key mechanisms: Integrated Development Plan (IDP), Ward Committees, Imbizos, and Participatory Budgeting. The findings indicate that citizen participation is largely tokenistic, characterised by low levels of engagement and a significant disconnect between citizen involvement and actual municipal decision-making. Specifically, citizen participation mostly occurs in the lower rung of Arnstein's ladder (tokenism), such as informing, consultation, and placation, reflecting a limited impact on policy and service delivery outcomes. This finding is supported by research from Matloga et al. (2024), who posited that in South African municipalities, many citizens are sidelined from mainstream activities such as IDP forum meetings, mayoral imbizos, and processes that are meant to promote efficient and effective service delivery through citizen participation.

The study reveals that in the context of the IDP process, citizen involvement in Ngqushwa Local Municipality aligns predominantly with the "informing" stage of Arnstein's Ladder. While the IDP intends to involve citizens in decision-making processes regarding local development, the actual practice is largely superficial. Municipal officials disseminate information, but there is little opportunity for citizens to engage meaningfully or influence outcomes. This finding is consistent with the work of Petunia and Selepi (2020) and Levine (2017), who argued that in many cases, public participation in development processes becomes more about disseminating information rather than genuinely empowering citizens. As such, engagement is passive, resembling an information-sharing session more than a platform for collaborative decision making.

According to the Ngqushwa IDP (2020), ward committees within the municipality serve as a communication link between the citizens and the municipality through the ward councillor. However, our findings reveal that participation in ward committees underscores the tokenistic nature of engagement. Citizens are often present at meetings but typically

rubber-stamp predetermined decisions, reducing the process to a consultative role. This reflects the advisory nature of ward committees as noted by Bester (2022) and Silima and Auriacombe (2013). Citizens may voice concerns, but these rarely translate into actionable changes. The lack of decision-making power within these committees limits their effectiveness as true mechanisms for participatory governance. Essentially, while there is space for citizen input, there is little evidence that these inputs have any real influence on municipal policies or actions.

The study finds that citizen participation in Imbizos is largely symbolic rather than substantive, with municipal officials dominating the discussions. A small number of citizens are permitted to ask questions, but this engagement aligns with Arnstein's ladder's placation stage. The Ngqushwa Local Municipality has seen a decline of people attending Imbizo sessions with the municipality in the past ten years (NLM Annual Report, 2023). A study by Zamisa and Taruvunga (2022) found that community members have lost trust in Ngqushwa municipal officials as they feel they are not considered in decision-making during imbizo. A study by Pepper (2019) further revealed that in the Ngqushwa local municipality, a lack of awareness regarding imbizo dates, venues, and the purpose of imbizo was contributing to the decline in the number of people attending these imbizo. Mpabanga (2022) suggests that, at the placation level, municipal processes tend to handpick certain individuals or groups to appease the community, giving an illusion of participation without transferring real decision-making power. The power imbalance between citizens and officials in Imbizos suggests that while citizens are present, their influence is minimal, reinforcing the view that these forums are designed more for managing dissent than for the co-creation of solutions.

In the case of Participatory Budgeting, this study reveals that citizen contributions are filtered and often undermined by municipal officials, again pointing to placation. While the process is theoretically inclusive, officials make the ultimate budget decisions with minimal alterations based on public input. This finding echoes the conclusions made by Kraai et al. (2023), who argue that participatory budgeting in South African municipalities often fails to incorporate citizen suggestions meaningfully. As a result, the process becomes another form in which public engagement is encouraged, but not genuinely reflected in the final budget allocations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

These findings highlight critical challenges in fostering authentic citizen participation through social accountability mechanisms, which have significant implications for both municipal practice and broader public administration reform.

To move beyond tokenistic engagement, municipalities such as Ngqushwa should strengthen deliberative processes. This includes providing citizens with not only information but also the opportunity to influence decisions. Ward Committees should be given more decision-making authority, shifting from an advisory role to one in which citizens can veto or propose alternatives to municipal decisions. This requires capacity building for both committee members and municipal staff to ensure more egalitarian interactions. Additionally, the dominance of municipal officials in Imbizos can be addressed by restructuring the format of these meetings to encourage citizen-led discussions. A more transparent agenda-setting process, coupled with facilitated dialogue, could empower citizens to raise concerns more effectively and ensure that their voices are genuinely considered. Finally, the municipality should reform participatory budgeting processes to ensure that citizen inputs are not merely considered, but integrated into final decisions. This could involve third-party audits or community review boards to ensure that municipal officials are accountable for citizen priorities.

CONCLUSION

This study assessed citizen participation in social accountability mechanisms within the Ngqushwa Local Municipality, utilising Arnstein's participation ladder as a theoretical lens. The findings reveal that, despite the existence of participatory platforms such as the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), Ward Committees, Imbizos, and Participatory Budgeting, citizen involvement remains largely tokenistic. Most participation occurs at the lower rungs of Arnstein's ladder, informing, consultation, and placation, which highlights the superficial nature of engagement in the municipality. Citizens are often informed about decisions rather than being active contributors, and their inputs rarely shape the final outcomes.

While ostensibly participatory, the IDP process is dominated by municipal officials, who control the flow of information and limit citizens' capacity to meaningfully influence development plans. Similarly, Ward Committees and Imbizos serve as consultative platforms but without real decision-making power, rendering citizens' contributions merely advisory. In Participatory Budgeting, citizen input is filtered and often disregarded by officials, further undermining the participatory process.

The practical implications suggest that meaningful citizen participation requires structural reforms to existing mechanisms. The Municipality must move beyond mere token engagement and foster deliberative, transparent, and empowering processes in which citizens are not just informed but actively involved in shaping local policies and service delivery. This includes empowering ward committees, enhancing transparency in public meetings, and reforming participatory budgeting to ensure that public input is meaningfully integrated into final decisions. By doing so, the municipality will not only improve social accountability, but also foster greater trust and cohesion between citizens and the state, which is essential for sustainable and effective governance.

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