

Public Participation in Municipal Planning and Development: South African Local Government Perspective

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Submitted: 10 May 2025

Revised: 25 June 2026

Published: 09 July 2026

Abstract:

This article aims to explore public participation in municipal planning and development, looking at South African Local Governments. “Section 152(1)(e) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996” governs how community members and community groups participate in local government to improve democracy. Local governments need to create a culture of governance that blends public participation with representative democracy. Nevertheless, community participation in local government has not led to the improvement of governance or the development of democracy since municipalities have not done enough to include “communities” in municipal matters. It is also argued that there is a disconnect between what rural community residents genuinely need and want through community dialogue and involvement programs and what the municipality is doing. Dissatisfaction with local governments is demonstrated by service delivery protests, which erode public authority and invalidate government practices and hinder the development of a culture of community involvement. The public's discontent with local governments is the cause, even though South Africa has sufficient legal requirements for public participation. The study adopted a qualitative method relying heavily on secondary data. The findings showed that, despite a lack of knowledge regarding municipal affairs, municipalities can achieve their maximum service delivery potential if they implement community engagement strategies. The paper concludes that an improved means of community participation and involvement in IDP processes is essential for service delivery.”

Keywords: Public Participation; Integrated Development Plan (IDP); Service Delivery

INTRODUCTION

The Pre-apartheid South Africa was renowned for its arbitrary decision-making processes and a political system that benefited the small population of the nation.” Important decisions were made without most people's involvement, which led to skewed governance and uneven service delivery. Post-apartheid in South Africa, a new buzzword called public participation, emerged to promote local governance in local government. In South Africa, “public participation” is a new phenomenon (Nyalunga, 2006). Ambert outlined that the prevalence of participation as a buzzword stems from a rising realization of the need to include stakeholders in development intervention (Ambert, 2000). The words public, citizen, people, and stakeholder will all be used synonymously in this study. Public participation was created by law, and the South African government has acknowledged it in every

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institution. The South African Constitution creates three distinct, linked, and interdependent spheres of government (National, Provincial, and Local Government).

Through laws and legislation, these three branches of government are obligated to promote a nation that is hands-on when it comes to concerns impacting their well-being in their separate localities around the Republic. Citizens will be allowed to point out their concerns when their government embarks on any development initiatives in their community because of these laws. It should be mentioned that “public participation” will “take place in the local government” domain, which is comprised of municipalities.

According to Nyalunga, those in power in the new South Africa were obligated to provide room for community engagement after the death of the renowned apartheid administration (Nyalunga, 2006). To encourage public participation, the new administration began delegating administrative and political power to autonomous local level statutory entities like municipalities, local councils, and ward committees. Governance is ensured in all South African municipalities through stakeholder participation. The corporate community, non-governmental groups, civil society organizations, and community-based organizations are all examples of community-based organizations.

These groups serve as community watchdogs, ensuring that everyone represented are participating in government matters. The involvement of communities and community groups in government activities to guarantee that their opinions are heard is known as public participation. Holdar and Zakharchonke define public participation as a community-based process in which people band together through non-governmental community organizations to establish themselves and their goals at the grassroots level to have an impact on decision-making (Zakharchonke, 2002).

Furthermore, the public becomes most active in this procedure when the topic at hand is directly related to them. Moreover, public participation happens when all stakeholders work together to make improvements. To accomplish the goals of local government outlined in the Constitution of 1996, as amended, “the Local Government Municipal Systems Act, 2000 (Act 32 of 2000)” encourages municipalities to promote a “culture of local governance that complements representative government with public participation.” Promoting public partnership and participation is justified by the belief that, if people are involved in development programs, they will be seen as legitimate.

In South Africa, this is the case with integrated development planning (IDP), public-private partnerships (PPPs), and local economic development (LED) (Davids, et al., 2005). Since it guarantees the legitimacy of the administration and the right to make decisions, public participation in local government is regarded as the cornerstone of democracy. Municipal governments are advised to ensure that communities and community groups are engaged in municipal planning, since public participation is a crucial part of local democracy. In this sense, community involvement revolves around municipal Integrated Development Planning (IDP), which takes center stage (Subban, et al., 2008).

Ragolane and Malatji expresses that public participation and service delivery in most South African municipalities are still a difficulty as communities always voice out issues about service delivery they require from municipalities (Ragolane and Malatji, 2021). The African National Congress (ANC), which came into power in 1994 has been striving to improve service delivery to all the people, regardless of race and colour. To improve the delivery of those basic services sustainably, municipalities should consider the community’s contributions and involve them in all structures representing members of the public (Glenn Mark A. Togle, 2026). Nevertheless, the problem arises when the community and structures are reluctant to attend public participation meetings because of lack of prior consultation by municipalities to give the agenda and clarify the importance of meetings. Although South Africa has adequate legal requirements for public participation, a culture of it is not being developed due to the public’s dissatisfaction with local governments as evidenced by service delivery protests, which undermines the public’s power and invalidates government practices. As a result, the key issue that must be investigated is whether public participation has any real effect on the drafting of municipal plans within South African Local governments.

METHODS

The paper used a qualitative approach and made extensive use of secondary data (Bgdan, 2025). Secondary data was used to assess public participation in municipal planning and development within the framework of South African local governments. The selection of this approach was influenced by the wealth of available literature and empirical studies. As a result, desktop research on public participation in the creation of municipal plans was found on the utilization of a wide range of materials, including books, newspapers, journal articles, and online resources. The researchers discovered that desktop analysis was an effective strategy for accomplishing the article's goals and generating a fresh viewpoint on the study's primary variables by challenging the positions and discourses that are used to describe the phenomenon under investigation.

RESULTS

Public Participation in Municipal Planning and Development

Local democracy requires public participation as a fundamental principle (Huang, et al., 2021). It enables the populace to participate and contribute to finding more remedies to any kind of issue. To ensure shared ideals and essential living conditions in a modern society, it is important to emphasize the people's active engagement in planning and decision-making (Aaron Fichtelberg, 2026). Additionally, actively engaging the public in decision-making through deliberate public participation is a method of gathering input from a broad range of stakeholder interests, which results in a variety of perspectives and produces meaningful participation and social inclusion for all people in any case of race, national origin, sexual orientation, income, or other characteristics (Quick & Bryson, 2016).

According to Chompunth, public input has grown to be a crucial component of ecological decision-making. Even though people's pressure on local government has led to a significant increase in public engagement (Chompunth, 2020). A research study by Mehlappe asserts that the Republic of South Africa's 1996 Constitution, Section 152, mandates that local governments ensure the long-term provision of services to communities (Mehlappe, 2022). Furthermore, it has been made clear that local governments have a specific obligation to advance public participation in local governance concerns. The notion is that local government, which is the area of government closest to the people, can better identify and address the needs of people at the local level.

Therefore, for a democracy to operate efficiently, residents must be encouraged to get involved in local affairs. The public will have the chance to define and express their development requirements in this respect, as well as take part in the procedures for addressing such needs. It is imperative to give up the notion that citizens are only passive participants in development processes and instead promote the idea that citizens are proactive agents of growth and change. The main tools used by municipalities to determine the goals for the development of municipal regions are Integrated Development Plans (IDPs). IDPs are therefore the cornerstone of community involvement since they provide residents and community organizations with the ability to direct the municipality's growth.

Stakeholders' Involvement in the IDP process as a tool for improved community participation

The IDP process is a complicated one that includes several stakeholders. According to Mamokhere & Meyer (2022), the IDP is a participatory and integrative process that calls for input from various stakeholders at various points in the process. The IDP process involves the municipalities. Munzhedzi claims in a similar vein that municipalities in South Africa are tasked with identifying community needs via a variety of avenues, such as public meetings and petitions (Munzhedzi, 2020). According to the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000, each municipality must initiate a system of participatory governance to increase formal representative government. Municipal councils should promote community participation in decisions that have a direct impact on them.

The right to community involvement in the political process is guaranteed by the constitution and is safeguarded by several legal frameworks that control local government. Information sharing and

improvement of choices, programs, and initiatives are the goals of community engagement. In agreement with the researchers, Modise states that community participation is a major issue for democratic South Africa due to communities' weak understanding of municipalities' rights and functions (Modise, 2017). The Republic of South Africa's Constitution of 1996, Section 152(1), and the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000, Section 25(1), both urge the active participation of all relevant stakeholders, including citizens and non-governmental organizations.

Ward Committee

A ward councillor serves as chair of the ward committee, which cannot have more than 10 members. The term "ward committee" refers to the legal mechanism that non-political organizations that advocate for local concerns use to interact with the government. Through ward councillors, this committee plays a crucial part in evolving community issues before the municipal council. The current government institution closest to the people is local government (Silima & Auriacombe, 2013). Ward committees might assist in fostering communication between residents and their towns throughout municipal planning and needs identification procedures. For example, committee members might support community discussion on community needs and priorities within wards for the integrated development planning (IDP) and budget procedures in the typical setting and then feed this information through to municipal planning and budget processes. The difficulty is that most ward committees are dysfunctional and so untrustworthy (Mautjana & Makombe, 2014).

Municipal Councils

Municipal councils, who are the legislators in a municipality known as "by laws," serve as the state's legislative branch. According to Munzhedzi, the legislative branch of a nation, province, or municipality consists of the top lawmakers (Munzhedzi, 2020). The legislative power of the national sphere of government is granted to the national parliament, provincial legislatures in the provinces, and municipal councils, in accordance with Section 43 of the 1996 Constitution. Municipal legislators oversee ensuring the general welfare of local communities and the efficient distribution of limited resources within their respective municipalities, particularly through municipal budget.

These municipal councils carry out their duties through governance, in which individuals charged with carrying out implementation duties are routinely held accountable. In essence, the municipal councils supervise how the administration, which is supervised by the municipal managers, performs, and operates. Senior management is called before the local council meeting to explain any shortcomings in the delivery of municipal services or the implementation of municipal programs. To make sure that remedial steps are implemented, ongoing monitoring and assessment are conducted. Corrective actions might include suggesting that individuals responsible for the failures be fired, educating those lacking the necessary skills, or providing the necessary funding for the effective and efficient execution of municipal initiatives.

However, it must be recognized that municipal councils frequently lack the capabilities needed to guarantee effective involvement by all important parties within the municipal jurisdiction (Munzhedzi, 2020). Nevertheless, it is the duty of municipal councils to provide an environment that allows all key players to engage actively in the planning and development of their communities (Thornhill & Cloete, 2014). Other actors are probably not going to be effective in their positions without good performance from local councils.

Local Communities

Public policies are developed on behalf of or for a certain community in each locale (Munzhedzi, 2020). According to research, when public policies are created without the active involvement of the local communities that will be impacted, they are more likely to encounter issues and face opposition when they are put into practice. Individual individuals, groups of people in a certain area, interest organizations, or pressure groups might all be considered local communities. Voting for a certain political party in the municipal elections is one way for an individual person to demonstrate support for that party or disagree with the policies put out by the opposing parties.

A petition written by a group of people (such as an interest or pressure group) expressing their concerns to municipal politicians may also take this form. This petition shapes governmental policy, especially IDPs. Local communities should participate in more than just voting; they should also contribute to identifying problems in their own neighborhoods, offer potential solutions, and monitor and assess whether IDP goals are being attained (Hosifi, 2014).

In a nutshell, governments should urge communities to actively participate in integrated development planning through community mobilization initiatives (IDP). Communities must guarantee that the elected political leadership is held to the highest standards of democratic accountability for the policies they are authorized to advance. There is a shortage of engaged citizens, political will, and dedication when it comes to community involvement in municipal planning and policy. Leaders of reputable institutions including civic, cultural, religious, welfare, recreational, youth, business, and other groups of people may also speak for local communities. The issue is that these figures of authority could promote their own interests rather than those of the community they serve.

Provincial and National Sector Departments

There is frequently enough interconnectedness between municipal, provincial, and national domains of governance to allow for effective concurrence, interrelation, and dependency. Since integrated development planning is an intergovernmental system of planning, the interactions between different sectors of government are crucial for its development and execution (Munzhedzi, 2016). Because of this, the provincial and federal governments should make some contributions to the design and execution of municipal integrated development. Within their local government jurisdiction, sector departments should follow the IDP's guidelines for resource distribution. Municipality should also consider the plans and strategies of the departments sector. The sector departments are guided by the availability of an authorized IDP on where their services are needed and, consequently, how to distribute their resources (Munzhedzi, 2020).

The Impact of Public participation in the Decision-making processes

According to Suphattanakul, public participation is the tool of the government to gather citizens or customers' information to increase performance and respond to their needs and expectations. Public participation in decision-making processes improves citizen's income, security, and self-esteem (Suphattanakul, 2018). Themba and Selepe emphasizes that community participation in decision-making and policymaking often involves a one-way flow of information from the municipality to the local community members (Themba and Selepe, 2020). Through its decision-making tool, a municipality consults the community before making any decisions.

Osehi and Cotties (2018) explains that when one considers concerns controlling fundamental leadership to achieve economic progress, the issue of community collaboration is now a fixed norm. They emphasize further that districts and municipalities are required by law to counsel or inform the community. Legislators and other authorities may occasionally view this as something they are forced to do rather than something that will benefit them. Some people are also afraid to approach the community group as they believe that report-back or discussion meetings would eventually turn into a platform for raising non-conveyance problems.

According to Abdi, including citizens in local government decision-making processes is a significant worth and priority in democratic and civilized societies (Abdi, 2017). Most countries of the world, governments are restructuring and strengthening their system of local governments, transferring responsibilities and resources to lower levels of governments. Nations have different driving factors such as, political, social and economic as well as external and internal. The shared assumption is that transferring responsibility for service provision to the third tier of government should help ensure that resource use and decision match the priorities and needs of communities.

Public Participation is the ability for interested actors to change their opinions, allowing individuals to come to a common knowledge of the challenges and solutions rather than simply exchanging ideas (Barreiro-Gen et al., 2019). The absence of public participation in local authority planning decision-making will result in several concerns containing unfavourable responses or demonstrations. This is because the local government, authority, or development company's strategy or agenda did not

consider the needs or demands of the community. Some of the local government's ideas are frightening and just concentrate on generating revenue and financial gain. This seems like an act of elitism and egotism when the planning ignores the needs of the local people. When the public is allowed to participate in the decision-making process is another matter that requires consideration. The five phases of the decision-making process for local planning include input, planning, implementation, monitoring, and reaction (Ali & Kadir, 2020). Public participation should be allowed in most aspects of the decision-making process for any development project affecting their community area to provide them with an equitable opportunity to engage and give them the impression that their choices were heard.

Quick and Bryson implicated that community participation gives the opportunity for communication between decision-makers and community members; citizens may contribute to decision-making by suggesting different ideas for solving a concern and the need to address problems (Quick and Bryson, 2016). Community participation is understood as a process whereby different actors within the community are involved in policy and decision making before decisions about development initiatives are taken.

Themba and Selepe reflect that community participation in matters of local government may assist the municipality and the community members to become more knowledgeable and develop a broader view of issues (Themba and Selepe, 2020). Participation from the community in a municipality aid in the identification of any potentially dangerous gaps ensures the implementation of appropriate solutions and supports the more equal allocation of the municipality's limited public resources. Additionally, taking part gives you access to tools for future implementation and problem-solving related to public concerns (Quick & Bryson, 2016). According to Thusi, the fundamental tenet of public participation is the recognition that including stakeholders in discussions about local concerns and larger societal issues has significant socio-economic and social advantages (Thusi et al., 2023). Effective participation also necessitates participation in information collecting, analysis, decision making, and execution.

DISCUSSION

Mamokhere et al, (2021) expressed that active participation, accountability, transparency, and openness are the cornerstones of democracy. The United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs (2021) also agrees with the idea, stating that governments should ensure that all residents have access to services, support, and information to guarantee accountability and decision-making processes. Overall, promoting and strengthening public participation in decision-making is essential in South African municipalities as enshrined the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996.

Enwereji & Uwizeyimana (2020) emphasizes that public participation is crucial in the decision-making processes as it fosters a better relationship between communities and the government which supports the idea of utilizing methods to facilitate decision making process. The White Paper on Local Government (1998) highlights that municipalities should create mechanisms to guarantee participation and good governance in policymaking and uphold decision-making appraisal. In other words, the municipality should encourage community participation in such meetings as it is their democratic right to be engaged and consulted in the matters of the municipality, mainly in the IDP.

Tshabalala and Lombard contend that enabling community members to participate in decisions that affect them is an empowering process that allows them to improve their skills and abilities to negotiate for their needs and demands (Tshabalala and Lombard, 2020). Similarly, Dyum also articulates that the empowered community members in different communities' institute empowered municipalities by growing community participation in decision-making processes (Dyum, 2020).

Molale demonstrates that the principle of empowerment, which is a key aspect of public administration, does not accurately reflect the relationship between local government and communities it serves. This may assist to explain the current trend of violent protests in South African municipalities, which are supplemented by damage to public properties (Molale, 2019). Therefore, the

municipalities should adopt the principle of empowerment to avoid such damage from the community members who resort to protest actions when they do not feel they belong or are not sanctioned by their municipalities.

Mamokhere and Meyer confirms that the nature is an integrative and participatory process, which requires input from different stakeholders throughout the process (Mamokhere and Meyer, 2022). The IDP process is designed to engage and involve all stakeholders in the community including community members and government agencies. Sebei further substantiated that an understanding of the IDP process is significant because that is where developmental goals are accomplished for betterment and improvement of the lives of inhabitants (Sebei, 2014). All stakeholders who reside or do business in a municipal area are welcome to participate in the IDP formulation and implementation process, according to Municipal Systems Act (Act 32 of 2000).

In agreement to the above statements, Enwerji & Uwezeyimana underlines that community participation entails discussion and dialogue among many stakeholders to reach mutually beneficial decisions (Enwerji & Uwezeyimana, 2020). As a result, it is critical to recognize each stakeholder's role in developing their municipal area. However, Mushongera and Khanyi opine that communities should be involved in the development of this plan for the municipality to take their needs and expectations into consideration in the final draft of the IDP (Mushongera and Khanyi, 2019). This implies that it is crucial for the community members to play their part in the IDP plan and South African municipalities should be make means to align with the principles of engaging the community (Mushongera and Khanyi, 2019). An empirical study conducted by Yuwanto concurs that a lack of community participation hinders the implementation of public policies such as IDP, which supports the fact that lack of knowledge in the IDP process create difficulties in the community (Yuwanto et al., 2021).

Molepo & Maleka supports the idea that community participation is a critical instrument for achieving long-term development and promoting democracy in municipal governance (Molepo & Maleka, 2018). In essence, it can be said that most community members do not have any understanding of the IDP as the municipality does not go all the way out to facilitate and teach the community members what IDP is all about. However, Mathebula indicated that community participation helps the structure of a municipality plan properly regarding the preferences and needs of the community (Mathebula, 2018).

Therefore, the municipalities should encourage community participation in the IDP process so that they can have a better understanding of what IDP is all about and their part in the IDP process as Ndevu raised a concern that without the contribution of community members in the IDP process, municipalities will never accomplish their maximum outcomes in service delivery (Ndevu, 2018). It is further indicated that such situations give the community less hope that there is no way forward when it comes to such projects due to lack of monitoring.

Asha and Madzivhandila sustain that the key challenge to local government remains inadequate local planning which affects the quality of people's lives (Asha and Madzivhandila, 2018). Municipal Finance Management Act 56 of (2003) necessitates the establishment of a budget steering committee. In other words, it is the responsibility of the municipalities to align with the principles of Municipal Finance Management Act 56 of 2003 to utilize the approved budget for right use. This establishment does not only allow community members to partake in the budget procedure but also gratifies municipalities to consider the views on the community in the preparation, presentation, and adoption on the budget (Municipal Finance Management Act 56 of 2003).

Looking at what the law requires in terms of Local government: Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000, the municipalities must consult the community when setting its priorities, developing its plans, and allocating resources to priorities through the budget implemented. DeMenno indicated that active participation by the local communities in the decision-making process for municipal planning will bring numerous benefits such as gaining legitimacy for decisions (DeMenno, 2019). In other words, when the community gets involved in municipal affairs, they get the opportunity to raise concerns about their issues and report them to the council.

Furthermore, Mamokhere confirms that the democratic decision-making involves assessing situations, developing options, scheduling meetings, holding discussions, and voting for options (Mamokhere, 2019). Again, Buntaine convey that open dialogue reinforces decision-making, by ensuring different possibilities are considered (Buntaine et al., 2018). Additionally, it has the potential to bring expertise and experience to bear on complex issues and help to build public trust and support for decisions. In other words, the active participation of communities and community organizations is crucial to the effective operation of local government in building public trust (Gaventa, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Numerous laws that encourage public participation in government in overall and municipal planning have been created in South Africa. To promote national solidarity, municipalities are positioned strategically as agents of social reform. Municipalities have a role to play in facilitating the goals of a developmental state, and in this sense, public participation in politics is a crucial component in making the developmental state dream a reality. The article outlines the stakeholders involved in the implementation of IDP as well as the impact of public participation in the development of municipal plans. The article outlined the public participation in municipal planning and development to support the objectives preserved in the Constitution and outlined within the local government legislative framework.

Most of the citizens in the South African municipalities are untrained. It has been noted that the Integrated Development Plan of the municipality is written in English language. This applies to several other municipalities as well. The Local government sphere must lead in the process of removing all barriers to community participation and this must include provision for documents of government to be vernacular. It is suggested that the Municipalities must have regular awareness campaigns to update communities out the municipal policies. This would also make councilors aware of the policies of their own municipalities. Incidentally, the municipalities must develop and implement a civic education program to empower communities about the municipality's programs and the government policies and development programs in general. Municipalities need to develop several mechanisms to feedback communities on their needs. This should be incorporated in the IDP cycle such that municipalities are able to return to communities after effecting the IDP to update them of how their needs have been catered for in the IDP and budget. The municipality can make use of the imbizo program as well as the community radio stations, websites, social media, and local media outlets. Community-based organizations, e.g., churches, business chambers; etc. can be used effectively to spread the message.

From the above investigation, municipalities don't have mechanisms to measure the effectiveness of community participation on the intended beneficiaries. Therefore, the municipalities should organize town hall meetings where representatives from the municipalities can meet with the community to discuss the importance of public participation. Various forums can be utilized to educate the community in various ways, they can participate in the decision-making process and encourage them to take an active role. Municipalities must develop mechanisms and systems to measure the satisfaction of communities with their own community participation activities and processes.

Conflict of Interest

The author confirms no conflict of interest.

Funding

This study received no external funding.

How to cite:

Nkoane, L. (2026). Public Participation in Municipal Planning and Development: South African Local Government Perspective. *International Journal of Law, Social Science and Humanities (IJLSH)*, 3(2), 494-504. <https://doi.org/10.70193/ijlsh.v3i2.225>.

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