THE USE OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH IN A PARTICIPATIVE DEMOCRACY: IN CRITIQUE OF MECHANISMS FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

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–Abstract–

This paper aims to analyse government-developed citizen participation mechanisms in South Africa against the backdrop of Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a community development tool. Furthermore, the researchers investigate the concept "civic participation" to develop a potential framework for PAR in third-world democracies such as South Africa. The research methodology involved a critical desktop analysis of books, articles, regulatory policies, and strategy documents to analyse PAR as a possible development process for democratic participative governance. The research revealed that community challenges can only be solved by empowering citizens to identify and address problems within their respective communities, as well as to monitor the actions of elected and appointed public officials. Furthermore, ordinary people can cooperate with local government through civic structures to improve their social conditions. PAR can empower community members to participate in local government decision-making structures and processes. This paper recommends that this process should empower all stakeholders to gain the necessary insight and knowledge to develop action plans for community problems. PAR is the ideal

avenue to foster partnerships between government and communities.

Key Words: participative democracy, empowerment, community development, participatory action research

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, empowering citizens to participate in government decision making has become paramount in development thinking (Bekker, 2004). More recent debates on citizen-focused development through civic participation were driven by the former Millennium Development Goals (United Nations [UN], 1990). Public participation is undeniably a key cornerstone of a democratic country and good governance. Democratic decision making is based on the principle that every citizen who is affected, or might be affected, by a governance-related decision has the right to participate in government decision-making processes (University of Oregon, 2003). To ensure that this participation right is met, citizens should have access to democratic structures and processes, while government officials should respond to the needs of those who are affected by their decisions. Civic participation is of such importance that the UN started viewing "community participation" as a synonym for "community development" in the early 1950s (Bude, 2004, cited in Auriacombe, 2015). As this paper aims to gain a deeper understanding of civic participation, the first objective is to present a conceptual and contextual analysis of this term with specific reference to African democracies. The second objective is to outline the role of participative democracy within the South African context. The third objective is to assess Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a development framework for democratic collaborative governance on a local government level.

2. CIVIC PARTICIPATION AT THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL

Civic engagement implies using governance processes and structures to improve communities' wellbeing. This is done by developing and combining knowledge and skills to improve citizens' lives, as well as the communities in which they live (Michels & De Graaf, 2010). A conceptual and contextual analysis of civic participation at the local government level highlights various perspectives of both the term and its role in development (Deetz, 2007; Deetz & Irvin, 2008). Subsequently, several country-specific factors and aspects relating to respective democratic government dispensations play a role in defining civic participation (Barber, 2003). Civic participation does not always imply citizen participation in

the real sense of the word; nor does good governance end at the ballot box. Some authors (Kay, 1970; Hanberger, 2006) argue that there are various levels of civic participation. The continuum ranges from limited participation (citizens are involved sporadically by electing politicians who are tasked with giving them regular feedback), to collaborative civic participation (citizens and local government officials work as a team to improve communities) (Barber, 2003).

The first level of democracy is where citizens allow government officials to make decisions on their behalf and only expect incremental feedback from municipalities (Rowe & Frewer, 2005). Hanberger (2006) refers to this form of governance as "elitist democracy". Prior to 1994, the South African public service could have been regarded as an elitist democracy, as it did not provide for civic participation (Ngqele, 2010). Most citizens who were marginalised and excluded from governance processes during apartheid now face the challenge of participating in network governance and exercising their political rights and duties. The second level of democracy is characterised by an evolution in representative democracy. As such, governing officials are held accountable to their electorate (Hanberger, 2006). Citizens demand to form part of government decision-making processes to ensure that public services are improved. With citizen-focused democracy, violent community protests could erupt if citizens are not satisfied with service delivery, as is the case in South Africa (Hanberger, 2006). The third form is deliberative or collaborative democracy. As the highest form of democracy, community stakeholders are involved in deliberations with local government officials. Moreover, governance structures, processes, systems, and programmes focus on citizen participation, collective learning, and monitoring progress (Hanberger, 2006). In democratic countries with deliberative democracies, governments strive towards good governance so that citizens can enjoy the best quality of life possible (Quick & Bryson, 2016, cited in Auriacombe, 2015). Good governance follows a set of principles, namely participation, collaboration, transparency, responsibility, consensus, equality, and accountability. As such, it empowers citizens to prosper and progress towards sustainable socioeconomic development and economic freedom (Helao, 2015).

Participative and collaborative democracies must adhere to specific governance requirements. Notably, democratised service delivery cannot take place if these requirements are not implemented (Muthien, 2013). As the South African government is a signatory to the African Union's Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, it must comply with its provisions on the rule of law,

the principle of equal human rights for all citizens, as well as relying on the outcome of the judiciary and the legal instruments for democratic and participative governance (Maphunye, 2014). The following section focuses on participative democracy from a South African perspective.

3. REQUIREMENTS FOR CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

In a deliberative democracy (Helao, 2015), citizens are civically educated and empowered to participate in local government structures and processes (Michels & De Graaf, 2010). As citizens participate in governance-related decision making, it helps to ensure that their needs are met (Evans, 2011). In line with this, Alexander and Kane-Berman (2014) point out that citizens must have access to quality basic services. Moreover, communities are not overly reliant on the government and take responsibility for their wellbeing by utilising available resources for self-development (Evans, 2011). Furthermore, local economic growth is stimulated through networks consisting of local authorities, communities, and the private sector, which leads to more job opportunities (Alexander & Kane-Berman, 2014). Democratising service delivery implies that decisions should be decentralised, accessible, and transparent to citizens (Muthien, 2013). Despite all its challenges, South African public governance reform has made great strides since 1994 and forms part of more recent developments such as New Public Management and networked management.

The fragmented, undemocratic apartheid system was transformed into a unified, integrated, and decentralised government that functions on a national, provincial, and local level (Maphunye, 2014; Nel & Denoon-Stevens, 2015). The White Paper on Local Government (1998) contains a comprehensive legislative and policy framework to develop local government into a participatory governance structure. The Municipal Systems Act (No. 32 of 2000) underscores the importance of public participation. As such, it mandates local governments to capacitate public stakeholders, councillors, and municipal officials to engage in participatory processes. Furthermore, the Municipal Systems Act highlights that community participation lies at the core of effective and accountable municipal service delivery. It is therefore municipalities' responsibility to ensure that local community stakeholders, including traditional leaders, participate in governance structures and processes (Rowe & Frewer, 2005). Municipalities must therefore:

- consider residents' concerns when drafting by-laws and policies, as well as planning and implementing programmes such as integrated development plans (IDPs);

- provide communities with information and feedback regarding government activities on a regular basis (Alexander & Kane-Berman, 2014);

- ensure that councillors inform councils of the needs expressed by communities;

- invite community stakeholders to attend ward committee meetings to discuss community needs (Alexander & Kane-Berman, 2014);

- provide democratic and accountable government structures within local communities to promote socioeconomic development and a safe and healthy environment (Nel & Denoon-Stevens, 2015);

- provide services to communities in a sustainable manner;

- encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in local government matters (Alexander & Kane-Berman, 2014); and

- ensure collaboration and information sharing between community stakeholders, council representatives, and the private sector to improve the wellbeing of their respective communities (Evans, 2011).

An efficient public service plays a vital role in enhancing the developmental potential and wellbeing of a county and its citizens (Chikulo, 2013). Judging from the above, considerable strides have been made in South African public governance reform (Maphunye, 2014). The Public Service Commission (PSC, 2014), however, highlighted that laws and policies are not always easy to implement. The governance capacity of a participative democracy depends on the competence and effectiveness of its public administration (especially provincial and local government), as well as on the way that service delivery is managed (PSC, 2014). The PSC (2014) highlighted the following key challenges:

- In general, there is no integration between the three spheres of government. In some cases, national and provincial plans are not integrated with local IDPs (The Presidency, 2014).

- There is ambiguity regarding which sphere of government is responsible for implementing and financing specific functions.

- Provincial government often decentralises functions to municipalities without prior discussions or providing the necessary funding. As such, local government does not have the capacity to deliver the services (Nel & Denoon-Stevens, 2015).

- Provincial departments are lax in signing service agreements with local government and the private sector. In many cases, they fail to honour the conditions for funding community projects.

- The size of South African municipalities makes service delivery and community involvement extremely difficult (Alexander & Kane-Berman, 2014). Dwindling municipal resources also make it impossible to deal with high service demands (Ovens, 2013; Manyaka, 2014; Alexander & Kane-Berman, 2014).

- Communities should be encouraged to become involved in participatory processes; however, citizens are excluded from integrated planning and budgeting processes regarding municipal services.

- Section 152 of the Constitution of South Africa (1996) states that local government is not responsible for socioeconomic development, as is expected by the former Reconstruction and Development Programme. This has serious implications for community development (Nel & Denoon-Stevens, 2015).

- Poor accountability, corruption, nepotism, political appointments, and few clean audits remain a challenge (Alexander & Kane-Berman, 2014).

- Local government officials rarely follow the *Batho Pele* code of conduct when dealing with citizens.

- Local government indicators need to be developed, while functions need to be monitored more meticulously (The Presidency, 2014).

- A shortage of technical skills in all spheres of government remains a problem (PSC, 2014).

In theory, South Africa has implemented the democratic ideals of public participation and good governance (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2012). The government's public participation mechanisms are, however, insufficient to reach the National Development Plan (NDP) goal of maximising citizen development through collaboration between the public and the private sector (NPC, 2012). According to the Presidency (2012:64), "the foundations for a capable state have been laid, but there are major concerns about the weaknesses in how these structures function, which concerns the state's ability to pursue key development objectives".

In certain cases, there is little or no citizen participation, as well as limited public awareness of avenues to participate in local government processes (De Visser,

2009; Mautjana & Maombe, 2014). Despite legislative instruments such as the Constitution, structures (e.g. ward committees and councils), and processes (e.g. IDPs), "true participatory planning appears to be low as municipalities merely 'go through the motions' to comply with legislation and take limited account of inputs received" (Nel & Denoon-Stevens, 2015:3). Area-based ward committees are expected to play a critical role in linking community needs with IDP planning processes (Ngqele, 2010) and to assist local governments in bringing about people-centred, participatory, and democratic local governance. The rationale behind ward committees is to extend the roles of ward councillors to strengthen the relationship between the public and private sectors (Edigheji, 2005). Ward committees are therefore expected to facilitate local community leaders' participation in governance decisions. It is believed that these committees could add a practical dimension and substance to participative governance (Esau, 2007). Furthermore, it could facilitate a sense of community solidarity, self-development, and citizen responsibility (Michels & De Graaf, 2010). Active participation and close involvement in a well-functioning governance network should therefore:

- enhance the legitimacy of decisions, as citizens are in tune with community needs;

- help citizens to develop the civic skills and team values needed to ensure participation;

- empower citizens by including them in public decision-making processes;

- facilitate economic empowerment within communities;

- increase the quality of infrastructure and services in communities;

- enhance democracy and accountability; and

- work towards community cohesion, nation building, and community integration (Esau, 2007).

Not all municipalities have ward committees, as it is not mandatory to establish them (Putu, 2006). Even where municipalities have ward committees, there is no guarantee that they would be used for anything more than a rubber stamp of approval from citizens. Ward committees can currently only function in an advisory capacity and can therefore only make suggestions to councillors or the council. As a result, communities may feel frustrated and view the process as mere lip service. Councillors tend to become antagonistic towards ward committees when they attempt to ensure accountability and transparency among governance officials.

Although citizens have access to governance structures and processes, public officials are not responsive to community inputs. Section 195(1)(e) of the Constitution underscores the importance of responding to citizens' needs and facilitating public participation in governance decisions. Participatory bodies such as ward committees cannot function efficiently if the public does not view them as legitimate structures (Bekker, 2004:46). In most communities, public officials are reluctant to develop trusting relationships with communities through power sharing. Furthermore, "public officials fail to acknowledge that a collaborative democracy focuses on reaching common ground or consensus by considering multiple perspectives" (Auriacombe, 2015). Collaborative democracy is characterised by good communication, shared values, willingness to make mutual decisions, and collaborating to implement community-focused action plans. Furthermore, the lack of strong leadership and a sense of solidarity among citizens make it difficult to involve the public in community development (Nel & Denoon-Stevens, 2015).

Apart from ward committees, another way that citizens can participate in local government services is through surveys; however, opinion surveys have a limited effect on governance decisions (Michels, 2011). Nonetheless, the South African government often uses data collection and interpretation to analyse and find solutions to community-related challenges, as well as to develop action plans to address poverty and marginalisation (Nel & Denoon-Stevens, 2015). Yet another approach is the South African "social security system, whereby poor and vulnerable members of society receive free basic services, such as water, electricity, housing, education, healthcare and cash grants" (Auriacombe, 2015). This places an extra burden on municipal capacity. The number of social security grant beneficiaries has grown from two million in 1994 to approximately 20 million in 2018. As such, a third of the country's population receives assistance and as a result, funding for community development programmes is severely affected. South Africa still operates within a dependency framework and therefore implements a control-orientated form of participation. Within this context, the public's right to participation is accepted, yet the council has the final say (Nel & Denoon-Stevens, 2015). Truly democratising service delivery implies that decisions should be decentralised, accessible, and transparent to citizens (Muthien, 2013). In this regard, there is a focus on the three key cornerstones of democratic local government, namely integrated development planning, community participation, and performance management (Schmidt, 2008).

The socioeconomic upliftment of millions of citizens relies, *inter alia*, on investing in human potential and empowering communities to work alongside the government to become self-reliant (PSC, 2014). This is, however, no easy feat as most South African citizens have no or a limited background of democratic participation. It is therefore important to develop mechanisms that promote education, participation, and community development (Zurbriggen, 2014). Evidence suggests that civic structures enable cooperation between ordinary citizens and local government to improve social conditions (Mathie & Peters, 2008; Mathie & Cunningham, 2008). South Africa can only realise its NDP goals by drawing on the strengths of networks within the public and private sectors (NPC, 2012). A key factor in initiating and sustaining networks is to include citizens in these interdependent relationships (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012). To ensure success, goals, responsibilities, and decision-making powers should be shared among role players (Edigheji, 2005).

The growing number of community protests reflects South African citizens' frustration with local government. Moreover, it highlights their desire to participate in decision making and to ensure that officials and politicians are held accountable (Powell, O'Donovan & De Visser, 2015). It is debatable whether the government is strategically positioned to ensure active citizen involvement in the country's network governance system (Deetz, 2007; Powell, 2012). To become a participative democracy, local government should change its mindset from following a dependency model of doing things for citizens to an empowerment model of doing things in collaboration with citizens. Community challenges can only be solved by empowering citizens to identify and address their own problems, as well as monitoring activities in cooperation with elected and appointed public officials (NPC, 2012). Working in collaboration with local government to address community problems can benefit disempowered individuals on a psychological level, as they start experiencing a sense of belonging and empowerment. It also serves as a catalyst for wider-scale community development, as citizens realise that they are in control of their own destinies. Participative processes should therefore focus on responding to marginalised citizens' needs. The next section assesses PAR as a development framework for democratic collaborative governance on a local government level.

4. PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR)

PAR can be regarded as a cyclical, conscious, and knowledge-raising research process that is based on the philosophy of action research and self-actualisation.

The research process merges indigenous and scientific knowledge in a bid to empower communities to bring about meaningful social change (Brydon-Miller et al., 2011). The focus is therefore on strengths, abilities, and opportunities as the foundation for community development (Schurink & Schurink, 2009). PAR typically takes a multi-perspective approach as a range of qualitative or quantitative methodologies and methods can be used. The methods range from informal workshops and conducting quantitative research such as surveys, to conducting, analysing, and interpreting interviews (Huffman, 2017). There are many similarities between the PAR process and community development undertaken by the social welfare profession. The researcher typically acts as a facilitator. Building relationships is therefore a key aspect of the research process and sustainable community development (Aimers, 1999).

With PAR, the actual research takes a backseat to the process of finding common ground, cooperation, empowerment, collaboration, mobilisation, self-realisation, and community solidarity (Huffman, 2017). Stakeholders in the public and private sector should have the opportunity to gain the necessary insight, knowledge, and information regarding a specific situation or challenge, form part of the decision-making process, develop action plans, and address community problems (The Presidency, 2018). Collaboration between citizens, the facilitator/researcher, and local government officials requires a process of mutual deliberation. All participants should therefore be equal partners. Community stakeholders should undergo civic and communication skills training to ensure a sense of equality between partners. Decision-making processes should be transparent and there should be clearly defined, regular communication with the community. PAR has the potential to meet the requirements of the NPC and the special unit in the President's Office tasked with developing a model to spearhead participatory developmental democracy (The Presidency, 2018). Civic groups, such as non-governmental organisations and community-based-organisations, can help fast-track the PAR process. They can play a vital role in ensuring that stakeholders participate directly in decision-making processes by allowing space for negotiation, deliberation, and different viewpoints (Deetz, 2007).

Stakeholder partnerships should be strengthened on a continuous basis through dialogue, reflexivity, joint ventures, and a focus on mutual benefits. Partners should commit to agreed-upon decisions when implementing strategies. The rationale behind PAR is for communities to recognise opportunities and to become more self-reliant by harnessing shared strengths. While there is no recipe

for PAR, the key is to start small but dream big (Enserink, Witteveen & Lie, 2009). PAR has a set of values that all participants should honour to ensure that the research process is democratic, equitable, and focused on the wellbeing of community members (Huffman, 2017; Enserink et al., 2009). The following aspects are of crucial importance:

- Both the government and the community should support the process of evolving from a dependency model to an empowerment model.

- Ownership should focus on interdependent relationships, stakeholder participation, partnerships, and cooperation throughout the PAR process.

- All role players in the PAR process must have equal participation rights and should be treated equally. As there is a focus on inclusivity, participants must respect one another and their community values.

- There should be mutual acceptance, understanding, and social learning, while alternative perspectives must also be respected.

- An element of learning through reflection should be present, so that researchers and community members can examine what they have learned in a systematic and critical fashion.

- All parties involved should be held accountable for reaching objectives and using resources wisely (Enserink et al., 2009; Huffman, 2017).

5. CONCLUSION

It is essential that South Africa creates a participative government system that empowers communities to work alongside local government. If this does not happen, it will lead to more protests with citizens demanding better service delivery. PAR's strength lies in its ability to foster partnerships between the government, communities, and social service practitioners (Patton, 2008). Its goal in governance is to empower community members to participate in local government decision-making structures and processes. Partnership processes can teach participants how to make informed decisions to bring about change in their communities (Nel & Denoon-Stevens, 2015). Decision-making processes characterised by healthy participation structures, democratic processes, and partnerships between the community and municipalities could significantly enhance policymaking in local government. In this regard, PAR could strengthen

policy- and agenda-setting processes and assist with the analysis of community dynamics and priorities.

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