

Citizens' E-Participation at Local Municipal Government in South Africa

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Abstract: The emergence of the digital revolution has obligated governments all over the world to be more accessible, effective and accountable in the provision of public services. The South Africa government has implemented various Information and Communications Technology (ICT) enabled platforms in engaging citizens in decision-making, a resultant effect of high world E-government Development Index (EGDI) rating for the country. Irrespective of the rating, the citizens have resorted to public violence as a means of communicating about unsatisfactory service delivery issues. The South African government has continued to witness numerous service delivery protests, resulting in destruction of public property, injury and death of innocent citizens. This article therefore evaluates the application of e-participation in government decision-making, using a three-dimensional framework of e-enabling, e-engaging and e-empowering. The findings show that structural challenges exist that limit the achievement of the good intentions of e-participation. The article relies heavily on existing data and focuses at local municipal level, which is considered the closest point of contact between government and citizens.

Keywords: Government, e-participation, citizen, service delivery, local municipal level, South Africa.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The advent of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has transformed public institutions by driving the quest for greater accountability, transparency and effective service delivery. Increasingly, governments are using emerging technology to transform processes and practices. The global move regarding responsible governance centres on citizens' participation, which serves as the backbone for most governments in this present era. Not only is citizens' participation viewed as a democratic means of collaboration with citizens to ensure responsiveness and accountability, Kakemba and Nsingo, (2008) also argue that it has the potential to boost livelihoods and foster development. Furthermore, engaging citizens promotes efficiency, ensures inclusive society, transparency and improves the quality of public services (Royo and Yetano, 2015; Sæbø *et al.*, 2008).

Mawela *et al.* (2017) argue that local government is the delivery arm which is at the forefront of understanding citizens' needs. Pravin Gordhan, the then Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, noted that local government is the foundation in which processes of development, governance, and transformation begin (CoGTA, 2014). In addition, the South African Minister of Communications, Faith Muthambi emphasizes the

strategic position of local governments in addressing issues of democracy and mass participation of citizens within their specific locality (DoC, 2014). These remarks underscore the importance of interacting and engaging citizens at local municipal levels. Furthermore, citizens' engagement is evidenced in the South African legislation, specifically, Section 152 of the Constitution speaks of democracy, accountability and the need for involving citizens in matters that concern them. Similarly, Section 16(1) of the Local Government Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 also stipulates the need for, and encouragement of, participation in local matters, and adds that local government should do whatever it can to facilitate the process of participation (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996).

In light of these, communities are expected to be digitalized, that is, to be aware, informed, and to participate actively in the administration of public affairs at local government level considered the closest level of interaction between government and citizens. This follows the argument by Naranjo-Zolotov *et al.* (2019), that electronic consultation is considered one of the highest levels of e-participation because it empowers citizens. Realizing the importance of the digital democracy, the South African government took a further step in developing a policy framework - the National e-Government Strategy and Roadmap, which supports the use of ICT in delivering basic services, to improve efficiency and effectiveness, and ensure citizens access to government services (DTPS, 2017). The application of ICT is evident in the birth of 'South

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Africa Connect¹ (DoC, 2013) and other various government services such as the National Treasury's e-Tender Publication portal, e-Home Affairs services such as smartcard-IDs, the Batho Pele Gateway information portal, South African Revenue Services (SARS) e-filing, and the South African post office e-commerce services (South African Government, 2017). Furthermore, government has implemented a number of transversal projects such as the financial, personnel management systems and supply chain management systems (Persal, Bas and Logis) (South African Government, 2017). At local municipal levels is evidence of ICT enhanced services such as the application of e-strategies (Venter cited in Mzekandaba, 2017). Similarly, there are e-participation platforms such as Mobilitate, social media platforms - Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Google platform, (Bohler-Muller, 2013; Hollands, 2012; Papic and Noonan, 2011). At local government level is further evidence of e-invoicing service, online system for paying rates and digitization of government information (Mzekandaba, 2017). These milestones have led to South Africa being rated highly in the use of e-government-an E-government Development Index (EGDI) of 0.55 with a plus sign (+) and ranked 76 out of 193 on e-participation (UN 2016). This is considered an indication of tremendous progress in the use of technology in reaching out to its citizens.

Though studies have shown various challenges facing e-participation, such as its vulnerability to failure due to low adoption risk by the citizens (Omar *et al.*, 2017; Kersting, 2016), South Africa still rates high in the application of ICT tools. However, South Africa continues to witness a plethora of service delivery protests (Makhafola, 2018; Stats SA 2017; SASAS, 2016; Alexander, 2010). A comprehensive report by Alexander *et al.* (2018), noted that there were 375 community protests in 2017 in South Africa. Due to the high frequency of protests, Runciman (2017) termed South Africa as the protest capital of the world. The question then remains, how has the application of e-participation at local municipal levels of government impacted on addressing the service delivery issues in South Africa? To respond to this question, this article examines e-participation processes along a three-dimensional framework of enabling, engaging and

empowering. Specifically, the article explores the degree to which government has used the existing technological platforms for citizens engagement in addressing the service delivery issues, thus achieving an enabled and empowered society.

This paper is organized as follows: first, the authors illustrate the definition and the theoretical expositions on e-participation. This is followed by a literature review on aligning e-participation within the South African framework. Subsequently, the authors present information on the research methodology adopted for the study. The article further discusses the impact of e-participation in addressing the service delivery issues. The article closes by drawing a conclusion on the discussion of research findings, and by offering its limitations and recommendations for practice and future research.

2. THEORETICAL EXPOSITIONS ON THE CONCEPT OF E-PARTICIPATION

The concept of participation is located in different discourses and categories such as public, social and individual. Within these broad categories, Brodie *et al.* (2009) state that public participation entails the engagement of individuals with the various structures and institutions of democracy. Similarly, social participation refers to collective activities that individuals may be involved in as part of their everyday lives while individual participation (sometimes referred to as everyday politics) covers the choices and actions that individuals make as part of their daily lives and that are statements of the kind of society they want to live in (Brodie *et al.*, 2009). The common themes found in these definitions are the engagement of individuals and the available structures, which explains the need for a relationship between individuals and state.

Governments all over the world are recognizing the importance of public confidence and its benefits in ensuring trust in democracy and improved efficiency. The desire to become part of the information age has instigated a world-wide transformation process that puts information communication technology at the heart of government processes and practices (Heginbothman, 2006). Advances in technology have triggered governments adoption of online platforms to improve communication between government and citizens in issues such as planning of government policies and delivery of public services, thus the buzz word "e-participation". E-participation have been defined from different perspectives with similar concepts. A recent definition thus states that "e-

¹South Africa Connect: a seamless information infrastructure by 2030 that will underpin a dynamic and connected vibrant information society and a knowledge economy that is more inclusive, equitable and prosperous (DoC, 2013).

participation is a participatory process that is enabled by modern information and communication technologies, includes stakeholders in the public decision-making processes through active information exchange, and thus fosters fair and representative policy-making (Wirtz *et al.*, 2018). E-participation has a special focus on citizen engagement (Welch, 2012), considered a knowledge intensive process, which fosters open participatory governance and informed decisions through Information and Communications Technologies (Macintosh, 2006). Facets of participation may include collecting information, contributing to discussion, or consultation, on specific government related policy issues (Pardo, *et al.*, 2006). Increasingly, various e-participatory tools are being implemented to ensure citizens are well engaged and their input incorporated in decision-making. Albrecht *et al.* (2008), argue that such participation encourages and incorporates societal views in political and administrative decision-making processes, which in return empowers citizens, boosts their livelihood and fosters development.

Researchers have developed the framework of e-participation from a multidimensional perspectives involving various steps or phases. Wirtz *et al.* (2018) built their framework on factors and drivers of e-participation in the digital democracy. Scherer and Wimmer (2012) developed a five phase e-participatory framework for enterprises. The e-participatory framework suggested by Loukis *et al.* (2010) was for testing evaluation in pilot projects, while Kim's (2008), e-participatory framework was mainly for group decision-making. Macintosh and Whyte (2008) discussed ten dimensional frameworks of e-participation aimed at project planning and quality improvement. Tambouris *et al.* (2007_a, 2007_b) presented a framework that was built on assessing e-participation initiatives. Kersten (2003) developed a framework illustrating the implementation processes for

system design, deployment and decision-making in a digital democratic government.

The foundation for these frameworks lie on the United Nations declaration on good practices in public governance which emphasizes the need for citizens' engagement in the digital era. Thus, the view of the e-participation drawn from three dimensions, namely, e-information, e-consultation, and e-decision-making. Within the UN framework, e-information entails providing citizens with public information and access to public information with or without demand; e-consultation supports contributions from the citizens, and e-decision ensures that citizens are empowered by incorporating their views in decision-making making (United Nations, 2014). Against this backdrop, this article adopts the notion of a three-dimensional framework of enabling, engaging and empowering. The authors of this article built on existing conceptual framework of e-government developed by Ndou, (2004) and Heeks, (2001), and proposes a similar framework for e-participation.

In this framework, e-enabling is considered the first level of e-participation which deals with providing the appropriate support for citizens. Beltrán, (2015) argues that the first level of e-participation supports citizens who ordinarily would not have access to internet and helps them manage the data.

The second level of the framework which is e-engaging, has taken a political discourse among stakeholders. In public administration, engagement takes into account a process through which members of the public together the policymakers and other stakeholders deliberate in constructive, informed, and decisive dialogue on important public issues (Nabatchi, 2014). The e-engagement takes into account the online support system that enhances communication between government and citizens. Coleman and Blumler, (2009)

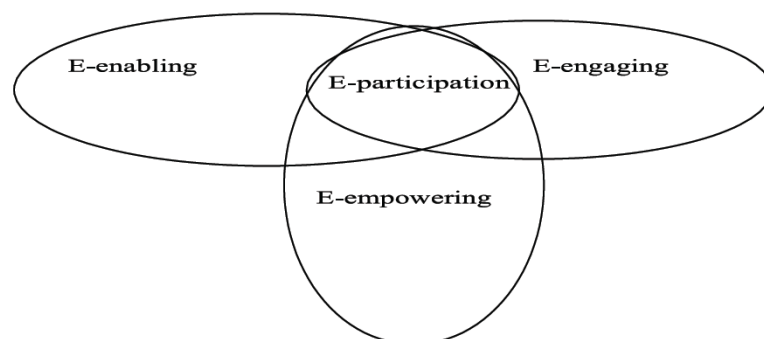


Figure 1: An overlapping domain of E-participation: A conceptual framework.

Source: Developed by authors using the frameworks of Ndou (2004) and Heeks, (2001).

emphasize the centrality of civic consultations in democracy. The flow and commitment in using the information would allow for deeper contributions into the policy debate.

The third level of e-participation entails the active part citizens' play and how their input influence decisions. Scullion *et al.* (2013) state that in empowerment, citizens acquire power to restore and strengthen the relationship between the government and the citizens. In doing so, Beltrán (2015) states that the e-empowerment level enhances the possibilities for people to control their own lives and improving them.

The authors of this article believe that the framework of e-participation should be able to provide the citizens access to information about governments services, the capacity and opportunities to use the information and transform it into action. In this regard, e-participatory tool should encourage communication by allowing forward and backward transmission of information which can be integrated in decision-making on matters affecting the citizens and society at large.

2.1. Aligning E-Participation within the Context of South Africa

Within the South African provincial government structure, there are three municipal levels: metropolitan, municipalities and sub-divisions to the latter, known as district municipalities. The district municipalities are further divided into local municipalities or districts. The research study focused on the local municipal level, which is believed to be the closest interphase between government and citizens. Within the South African purview, the idea of a people centered approach is evident in the South African principles of *Batho Pele* and Back to Basics. The phrase *Batho Pele*, a Sotho phrase that is interpreted or translated as "putting people first", was adopted in 1997 with a view to establishing a new service delivery framework that promoted efficient and effective use of public services, promoted economic well-being and held government accountable. This formed the inner core of the White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery *Batho Pele* (1997). The *Batho Pele* White paper is underpinned by eight principles of consultation, all of which provide a policy framework for the practical implementation strategy of how public services should be provided. The eight principles are service standards, access, courtesy, information, openness, transparency, redress and value for money (DPSA, 2003).

Though *Batho Pele* has formed the inner concept of service delivery since the democratic government of South Africa took over in 1994, developmental progress has seen minimal growth. Some developmental challenges have been seen to be endemic, especially in the local sphere, which recently led to the launching of the "Back to Basics" (B2B) programme on 17 September 2014. Back to Basics is premised on provision of better services; responsive, caring and accountability; performance improvement and reward and recognition (CoGTA, 2014). Similar to the concept of *Batho Pele*, B2B is about putting people and their concerns first, ensuring effective and meaningful community engagement, delivery of quality services, good governance, transparency, and holding public servants accountable for their actions. The core aspect of B2B lies in the extent to which municipalities engage their citizens/communities and address their concerns. Such citizen engagement requires a participatory platform for effective communication.

As noted in *Batho Pele* and Back to Basics principles, citizens take centre stage and provide for government existence. Similarly, the Municipal Systems Act (Act 32 of 2000) emphasizes the need for community participation. Section 16 (1) (a) of the Municipal Systems Act highlights the need to:

- Encourage and create conditions for the local community to participate in the affairs of the municipality, including the preparation, implementation and review of its Integrated Development Plan, and
- Contribute to building the capacity of the local community to enable it to participate in the affairs of the municipality (DPLG, 2000).

Achieving these objectives requires information dissemination using ICT for faster and wider coverage in reaching citizens. This paper therefore emphasizes, amongst other points, the need to put the concerns of the citizens first and make provision for an effective e-participatory platform for active citizen participation.

4. DOCUMENT ANALYSIS: A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Research methodology is a way to systematically solve research problems or theory relating to how an inquiry should proceed. This involves the analysis of the assumptions, principles and procedures in a particular approach to an inquiry (Schwardt, 2007; Kothari, 2004). The research technique employed for

the study is document analysis. Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents, both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) materials (Bowen, 2009). The use of document analysis requires data to be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Rapley, 2007). The rationale for adopting document analysis stems from the evidence of the research conducted by Harvey (2017), under which document analysis can be used for research purposes. Harvey notes that document analysis can be used, when the documents themselves are the focus of the research, when the documents constitute the main or support evidence in an enquiry and when the research enquiry involves undertaking a meta-analysis of all or a specified subset of the available published (and grey) literature on a subject (Harvey, 2017). This study satisfies the three conditions proposed by Harvey (2017) for the use of document analysis. In addition, the study also used document analysis because it is an acceptable social research method, an efficient and effective way of gathering data, cost and time effective, stable, unobtrusive and non-reactive, provides background information, broad coverage, and covers a long span of time (Traid 3, 2016; Bowen, 2009; Yin, 1994; Merriam, 1988).

Documents are classified into four categories, namely, public records, personal documents, physical materials/evidence and researcher-generated documents (Ary *et al.*, 2014; Labs, 2011). For the purposes of this study, the authors adopted document classification proposed by Ary *et al.* (2014) and they reviewed documents under the category of public records, personal documents and physical materials, as shown in Table 1.

The authors identified three provinces in South Africa, namely, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape, and reviewed various publications addressing e-government, focusing on e-participation at municipal levels within these provinces. The researchers' reasons for limiting the study to the three identified provinces stemmed from the fact that these provinces contribute largely to the nation's gross domestic product (GDP).

Gauteng province is the economic powerhouse of South Africa, remains the administrative capital of the nation and the only province that initially created a department called the Department of e-government (GDG 2017). The province shares 24.1% of the South African population of 50.2 million (Stats SA, 2016), contributes 33.3% to the nation's GDP and 10% of the total GDP of the entire African continent (Gautengonline, 2017). Similarly, KwaZulu-Natal is a key economic player in the South African economy. It is the second largest contributor (16%) to the nation's GDP and accounts for 20% of the nation's population (KZN Treasury 2017; Provincial Review, 2016). In the same vein, the Western Cape (WC) is the third largest contributor (14%) to the national GDP (Stats SA, 2016). Furthermore, the three-year period ((2013-14 to 2015-16) of audit review rated Western Cape (79%), Gauteng (60%) and KwaZulu-Natal (35%), as the provinces with the highest number of auditees with clean audit opinions (Auditor General South Africa, 2016_a). In addition, these provinces reflected the biggest improvement, with the Western Cape setting the pace (Auditor General South Africa, 2016_b). Given these facts about these provinces, out of 136 major service delivery protests in 2016, 28% occurred in Gauteng, 17% in KwaZulu-Natal and 9% in the Western Cape (Municipal IQ, 2017). The researchers therefore deemed it necessary to examine the extent to which e-participation had addressed the state of

Table 1: Summary of Categories of Documents Reviewed

Category	Type of material	Number of documents	Theme
Public record	Government publications, policy documents annual reports published at international/regional/national levels	30	Theoretical/legislative frameworks, e-government reports/statistics.
Personal document	Journals and newspapers publications	100	Empirical work on the developments in e-participation
Physical materials	Online photos, posters, agendas, handbooks, and training materials.	20	Publicizing the concept of e-participation
Total		150	

Source: Authors own compilation (2019).

service delivery drawing from the framework of enabling, engaging and empowering.

5. UNLOCKING E-PARTICIPATION CONCEPT AT LOCAL MUNICIPAL LEVELS

The concept of e-participation points to the need for citizens' contribution in decision-making on public services. As pointed out earlier, the integration of ICT is evident at all levels of government in South Africa. Citing examples within the scope of this article, the Province of Gauteng extends ICT services to various Gauteng City Regions (GCR) to consolidate back-end systems and processes for a better front-line service delivery to the people (GPG, 2015). The Gauteng province established the department of e-government in 2015 with the aim of providing online and digitalized services to enhance public service delivery (GPG, 2017). The KwaZulu-Natal legislature has an electronic petition's (e-Petition) section of their website (KZN Legislature, 2019). At the local municipalities in the three selected provinces (Gauteng, Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal), is evidence of e-participation platforms that support SMS, Email, Websites, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube channels, etcetera. For example, the city of Cape Town's online service, CityConnect provides a platform for e-participation (City of Cape Town, 2019). Keeping in mind the scope of this article, the authors examined research studies conducted specifically on e-participation at municipal levels.

5.1. The Dynamics of E-Participation at Local Municipal Level in Gauteng Province

The province of Gauteng has three metropolitan municipalities, namely, City of Johannesburg, City of Ekurhuleni and City of Tshwane Metropolitan. The municipalities are divided into two district municipalities which are further sub-divided into six local municipalities (Municipalities of South Africa, 2017). A few studies have been conducted to evaluate e-participation in the province. In line with this, three economically driven municipalities were reviewed, namely, the City of Johannesburg, Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality and City of Tshwane. The City of Johannesburg uses mostly a ward-cluster approach² for engagement (CoJ, 2017). The Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality engages citizens via a Mayoral Imbizo, the petitions management system,

outreach programmes, such as taking legislature to the people, sub-committees established by ward committees and project specific forums, supporting national and provincial initiatives, IDP and budget process (EMM, 2017). Similarly, the City of Tshwane supports participatory platforms such as petitions and memoranda, stakeholder forums, ward committees, public hearings, public meetings, inspection in loco/site visits and customer relations management (CoT, 2017).

Mngoma (2010), in a study on public participation in the informal trading by-laws amendment, conducted in the City of Johannesburg (CoJ), found that the city uses public meetings to reach out to the communities. Evidence from the study showed that the application of e-participation tended to be minimal. Cited in the study was the need for the informal traders to contribute to amended informal trade laws. The draft of the amended law, however, was issued on the day of the meeting which provided the informal traders minimal or no time to digest the material and contribute their views. A well-integrated e-participatory platform should have allowed a digitalized document in which concerned citizens could comment via technological devices such as tablets, smart phones and other social computing platforms prior to the scheduled meeting.

In developing the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality IDP for the period of 2016-2021, public comments were solicited via the public libraries and customer care centres supported by advertisements for public awareness (EMM, 2017). The public engagements took the form of consultation meetings and did not incorporate an e-participatory platform, which would have increased opinions and views of the community members.

5.2. E-Participation Evidenced at Local Municipal Levels in the Western Cape Province

The Western Cape has one metropolitan municipality which is the City of Cape Town Metropolitan Municipality and five district municipalities, which are further sub-divided into twenty-four local municipalities (Municipalities of South Africa 2017). The City of Cape Town digitalized government information to encourage citizen engagement in ensuring service delivery. Masueme (2015) analysed one of the e-participatory platforms in his study entitled E-participation implementation and adoption of a local government collaboration network. The researcher investigated the implementation of e-participation tool

²Ward cluster community engagement is a prelude to regional stakeholder summits which enables residents at the community level to engage and make valuable inputs in the City's plans (CoJ, 2017).

called SMS-based system between municipalities and citizens in the Western Cape. The study examined three municipalities and the findings show that challenges facing SMS-based system include accessibility, cost, level of participation, capabilities, technologies and feedback to the citizens. The study recommended skills development, alignment of skills to the levels of tasks required, encourage and incorporate feedback to achieve the benefits of the system. Van Belle and Cupido (2013) conducted a study on the perceptions of the use of mobile phones for increasing public participation in the City of Cape Town. Though the study was conducted at metropolitan level, the findings show that the level of social capital between government and citizens is extremely low (Van Belle and Cupido, 2013). In addition, Bennett (2015) conducted a study on the factors influencing the success of an e-participation project in South Africa at metropolitan level using the City of Cape Town. The researchers used a case study of an e-participation project called Project Lungisa³. The findings of the study identified among others, community integration as one of the factors affecting e-participation and recommended the need to exploit digital technology such as mobile phones for enhancing e-participation.

5.3. E-Participation at Local Municipal Levels in KwaZulu-Natal Province

The province of KwaZulu-Natal has one metropolitan municipality, that being the eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality, and 10 district municipalities, which are further sub-divided into 43 local municipalities (Municipalities of South Africa, 2017). Cele (2015) conducted a study on public participation in service delivery at the Umhlatuze Municipality, KwaZulu-Natal. The findings of the study indicated that the participation of community members was limited to being consulted and informed about decisions concerning the community on the provision of public services. The consultation platform takes the form of ward committee meetings and excludes digitalized platforms.

Njenga (2009) conducted a study, 'A Critical Analysis of Public Participation in the Integrated Development Plans (IDP) of Selected Municipalities in Some Provinces (Gauteng, Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape) in South Africa'. In the

Gauteng province, the researcher reviewed studies done at the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality, Emfuleni Local Municipality, Midvaal Local Municipality, Kungwini Municipality, West Rand District Municipality and Mogale City. Similarly, in the Western Cape, the study analysed research done at the Stellenbosch Municipality, City of Cape Town Municipality, Breede Valley Municipality and Boland Municipality. In KwaZulu-Natal, the researcher reviewed studies done in Msinga and Hisbicus Municipalities in the Ugu District Municipality, eThekweni Metro Municipality, and Sisonke Municipality. The municipalities facilitated public participation in the IDP process using public meetings/workshops, public hearings, Mayors' Listening Campaigns, road shows and ward-based meetings. The common theme found in the three provinces was that the municipalities in the study used low levels of participation, limited power by citizens to influence decisions, excluded e-participation and were not accommodating of the marginalized group who participation in the IDP process. Though this study was not recent and conducted after the launch of South Africa Connect, it provides insight into the municipalities' readiness towards the adoption of e-participation.

6. DISCUSSION ON RESEARCH FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The article examined e-participation at local municipal levels in three identified provinces in South Africa along the frameworks of e-enabling, e-engaging and e-empowering. The findings of the study vary within the context of the municipality. Given the strategic position of Gauteng province, literature findings suggests a greater pace in the implementation of various aspects of e-governance. Similarly, KwaZulu-Natal province covers a wider area with respect to rural communities due to its historical background and geographical location. The findings from both provinces indicate low levels of public participation and minimal application of e-participation at municipal levels. These findings support Mawela *et al.* (2017), who posit that municipalities still rely heavily on traditional methods of citizen participation such as meetings, special event, road show and other programmes. The findings from the reviewed literature show that though with the progress in implementation of e-governance in these provinces, the municipal levels of government resort to the use of more traditional form of citizen participation and minimal applications of e-participation which limits the e-

³Lungisa means "fix it" in isiXhosa and provides a platform to enable Cape Town citizens to send text based, audio and video reports outlining challenges in service delivery (The Indigo-Trust, 2012).

enabling dimension of e-participation. There is a likelihood of e-enabled participatory platform to reduce the widening digital divide mostly experienced in the rural communities.

The province of the Western Cape benefited hugely from the apartheid government in infrastructural development (Provincial Review, 2016), which impacted positively on the pace of e-participation processes. Findings show a number of e-participation projects being implemented but facing challenges such as participation from higher educational level individuals, low levels of social capital, lack of feedback and capabilities. Though there is evidence of e-enabling participatory platform, the low levels of social capital was a challenging factor. Social capital is measured along the dimensions of trust, social networks and civic norms (Putnam, 2000) The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017), refers social capital to networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups. The low levels of social capital in e-participation is an early indication of challenges within e-engaging. According to Scullion *et al.* (2013), an e-engaging platform should actively seek information by discussions and deliberations to enhanced informed decisions. There is a need for shared values, norms and understanding to ensure positive cooperation between government and citizens thereby ensuring empowering. Bagui and Bytheway, (2013) note that the necessary transformation needed to improve citizens' e-participation in the city of Cape Town is still far from reaching.

On a general note, Hurst (cited in Mzekandaba, 2017), notes that e-government projects lack adequate skills, capacity, cost, access and challenging infrastructure to achieve its full benefits. Caetano (cited in Mzekandaba, 2017) adds that inconsistent implementation and technological development hinders the efficiency and effectiveness in rolling out e-government plans which results in government departments seeking individual strategies as opposed to collective strategies. Deda, (cited in Mzekandaba, 2017) finds that strategic partnership will ensure development of consistent policies, educational awareness and adequate financial access.

With the local government being the closest platform between government and citizens, the debate on effective governance at local government level has continued to take the center stage amongst academics,

professionals and society in general. In the provision of basic services such as water, sanitation, electricity, refuse management etcetera (CoGTA, 2009), the municipalities across the sphere are continuously facing service delivery protests. Accordingly, Alexander *et al.* (2013) notes that more than 2000 public protests were recorded between 2004 and 2013 targeted local municipal governments with their primary grievances being service delivery. The South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), argued that there has been a 96% increase in service delivery protests in South Africa since 2010, some of which have resulted in malicious property damage, attacks on vehicles, barricading of roads, burning of tires and death of innocent citizens (SAIRR, 2015; Alexander *et al.*, 2013). Although the causes of service delivery unrest may be of multiple origins, many have been linked to increasing distance (especially in the rural areas), poor communication and mistrust between local administrators and the citizens/communities (CoGTA, 2014; Pithouse, 2011). In addition, Nkosi and Mekuria, (2010) traced the service delivery protests to government slow response rates to citizens' requests and lack of customer service orientation from public sector human resource. Evidence from various research studies reviewed show that the concept of e-participation remains untapped at the local municipal levels of government in South Africa (Tshoose, 2015; Bagui, 2013). Most public services at local municipal levels are yet to be aligned for an effective e-participation concept.

LIMITATIONS

The study explores e-participation at local municipal levels in three identified provinces Gauteng, Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces. The article adopts a document analysis research design and the findings on the limited data cannot generalize its claims for other provinces in South Africa. This is because most research studies reviewed were conducted at the Metropolitan Municipal levels, which is a bigger umbrella that houses districts and local municipalities. The proposed conceptual framework for e-participation has implications for policy-makers, academic researchers and society in general. An effective implementation of an e-participatory platform with key dimensions of e-enabling, e-engaging and e-empowerment will go a long way in reducing the myriad of service delivery protests engulfing the nation and the widening digital divide in the society. Conclusions were drawn from a wider concept considering e-participation beyond the local municipal levels.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is worthwhile to note that South African society is diverse in nature and the local municipal levels comprise communities with expectations widely driven by social, political, geographical and economic structures and circumstances. Future research can be directed to examination of the effectiveness of e-participation at local municipal levels in other provinces and impact on service delivery. This should then prompt the need for the implementation of EDGI at local municipal levels.

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Received on 30-04-2019

Accepted on 01-06-2019

Published on 07-08-2019

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.6000/1929-7092.2019.08.39>

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