

# Fostering effective service delivery through public participation

## A South African local government perspective

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### ABSTRACT

Public Administration is an eclectic discipline. This means that Public Administration, over the years has developed as a discipline by borrowing concepts and constructs from other fields of study. Thus, in the subject of Public Administration the concept of social contract might appear to be foreign. This article will argue that the social contract theory can be utilised as one of the means from which effective public participation in municipalities is achieved. In modern democratic states, public participation proves to be an imperative tool that is utilised for effective governance that results in the efficient delivery of services to the people. Therefore, public participation serves as an important feature of democracy.

Since democratisation in South Africa in 1994, interventions were made as an attempt to ensure inclusivity and participation by people from across different communities in the country. This article aims at evaluating the importance of public participation in local government. Firstly the paper will begin by discussing the concept public participation in the context of local government in South Africa. This discussion will be preceded by the provision a suitable definition of public participation.

Through various local government legislation and policies the communities in municipalities are warranted that their input will be considered when decisions affecting them are to be made. The article will further consider public participation as one of the tenets of local

democracy. This will be done by a means of establishing a definition of the concept and highlighting its importance in the discussion. Furthermore, the relevance of public participation in the discipline of Public Administration will be explored in detail and attempt to address pertinent questions related to service delivery. This will be done by focussing on the different approaches to public participation. The other aspect that will be highlighted in this article is the existence of various forms of public participation. Challenges associated to public participation are elaborated, in particular the discussion focus on how these challenges affect the delivery of services. Lastly, the significance of promoting effective public participation in a local government environment and recommendations are elaborated.

## INTRODUCTION

The South African local government sphere plays a significant role in the constant development of the livelihood of the local communities. In South Africa, local government is responsible for the provision and delivery of pertinent services, including access to potable water, proper sanitation, sustainable electricity supply, and regular waste removal amongst others. Without these services the quality of life of the people will deteriorate. Different spheres of government have to work together in an attempt to improve the delivery of services by municipalities and to ensure that local democracy is enhanced in the process. In order for effective decision making in the local government sphere to ensue, it is imperative to note the importance of public participation. The community members in municipalities can contribute meaningfully in the decision and policy making processes. This article will provide an analysis of public participation as a mechanism through which the delivery of services is achieved in a democratic local government.

It is in the local government sphere, where immediate contact between the people and the government can be established. Thus, this article will provide the rationale of determining local government as the imperative sphere of government where meaningful and broad participation could take place. Firstly, the article will discuss the concept *participation*. Classical literature is consulted to comprehend the origin and purpose of this concept in local government decision and policy-making. The process of participation is properly explained by the identified categories and the continuum of participation. The discussion will furthermore extend to the different approaches followed to achieve participation, along with the different role-players involved. Secondly, the

article will emphasise how community dynamics affect public participation. This will be done by explaining the alignment of social contract theory with public participation and further identifying the challenges associated to the participatory processes. The third aspect will be focussing on the means that could be utilised to achieve effective promotion of public participation. Furthermore some solutions for improving public participation in a bid to enhance the delivery of services will be provided. The last section will conclude the discussions ensued in the article.

## **CONCEPTUALISING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

Public participation is arguably an essential element of local democracy, which makes it a sacrosanct idea that is greatly admired by mostly the underprivileged citizens. It is important to offer a definition of the concept *public participation*, as it is the salient feature of the discussion. Public participation, similar to service delivery can have different meanings for different people, as such establishing a single common definition is essential. In basic terms, public participation could be defined as a process that allows for individuals within communities to positively contribute to the general good. Arnstein (2003:246) defines public participation as a definite concept for citizen power, where the distribution of power is enhanced to deliberately include the underdeveloped (those who could be excluded from participating in the political and economic processes) to attain their active participation in the future. In addition, Brynard's (1996:41) definition asserts public participation as a process undertaken by one or more individuals who were previously not included in the decision-making process concurrently with other individuals who were previously the only advocates in that process. This view affirms that public participation occurs in different types and categories within which power is located, and the definition would assist in eliminating distorted perceptions and establishing a common understanding on what genuine public participation is.

The definition by Pearce (2010:232) identifies the two types of public participation, *i.e.* direct citizen participation and participation through associations. On the one hand, direct citizen participation, pertains to an activity where members of the society in their individual capacity as citizens, participate in decision making processes. While on the other hand, participation through associations signifies a representative participation, where an individual is elected or appointed to represent the views and needs of those who elected or appointed them, in decision making process.

Creighton's (2005:7) definition appears to be more systematic as it views public participation as a two-way communication and collaborative activity

through which the people's concerns, needs, and values are acknowledged and integrated into the governmental decision making. Creighton (2005:7) affirms that public participation is not only confined to government alone, as private institutions could use it as a mechanism to improve decisions that are supported and appreciated by the public, *i.e.* their clients. It can thus be construed that public participation is a process that involves co-operation between the government and its citizens in the quest for the inclusion of the concerns and needs of the people in government. Public participation can be achieved through various means, and it is categorised accordingly.

## **Categories of participation**

Categories of participation were developed by Sherry Arnstein (1969) when the *eight rungs on the ladder of citizen participation* were initially established. These categories of participation are classified as a result of the power base that lies in participation. As identified by Arnstein, the ladder of citizen participation is comprised of eight steps that are incremental in terms of the contribution of the people in participation. For instance, the first step would consist of non-participation and the last step, ideal participation that is driven by the absolute power of the people.

It should be understood that the context within which the article is based aims at explicating local government milieu and as such ward committees are regarded as an instrument through which public participation is enhanced within this sphere. The following section will briefly discuss the categories of participation to ensure that the concept of public participation is properly analysed.

### **Non-participation**

The first phase of the process in the ladder of citizen participation, which is characterised as non-participation, consists of step one and two, *i.e.* manipulation and therapy processes. Non-participation occurs as the opposite for participation, where the people are not afforded the luxury to express their views and ideas on issues that are of concern to them. Consequently, non-participation becomes a single stream of communication that intends to educate the participants. Arnstein (2003:248) maintains that manipulation is an important element of non-participation and consequently, it is mostly evident in assemblies where the officials or the power-holders tend to educate, persuade and ultimately advise the citizens and not the other way round. This is the level where a municipality aims to set the agenda in order to influence processes of participation. The process of manipulation follows a top-down approach, where the few elite make decisions for all the citizens and on their behalf without

due consideration of their views and input. More often than not, when citizens find themselves predisposed to non-participation, they ordinarily lose interest in participating in such activities.

### **Tokenism**

Tokenism consists of various activities, including; informing, consultation and placation. Tokenism is a phase where an organisation, *i.e.* a municipality would create a platform for engagement with the people, but dominate the agenda of such an engagement and acknowledge patronage of the participants. This is observable in participation where influential power-holders possess the power of agenda setting. The challenge on this phase is that the people do not have enough influence to ensure that their concerns are considered by the decision makers in a municipality (Arnstein 2003:246).

Placation serves as a distinguishing factor for tokenism. As a result of it, some municipalities are able to protect themselves by establishing structures as required by Section 73 of the *Local Government: Municipal Structures Act, 1998* for compliance purposes and not necessarily for the enhancement of public participation. It should be acknowledged that placation is a higher level of tokenism which is being provided to the ward committees, and as such the municipal councils in this regard, possess the legislative power to make and enforce decisions, in spite of the discretionary powers devolved to the ward committees. Tokenism is simply explained by the acknowledgement of the existing structures, *i.e.* ward committees, as per the legal requirement (Madumo 2011:54).

### **Citizen power**

Citizen power is the ultimate ideal classification of participation where both citizens and the municipality ensues a discourse in an attempt to find solutions to a particular problem. This phase is composed of three levels, namely; partnership, delegated power and citizen control (Arnstein 2003:247). The main characteristic of citizen power is the distribution of power. This power is distributed through a process of negotiation, and it is mainly identified by the compromise made by the power-holders in an attempt to achieve an agreement on the issues of common interest. Consensus building is important in public participation, because it creates a concrete understanding between the parties involved, and this leads to improved decision making (Creighton 2005:19).

Citizen power is signified by the desire to propel the needs of the people, wherein the citizens regulate the processes that involve participation (Thornhill and Madumo 2011:140). As a result, the control and influence of decisions by the citizen could be viewed as an important component towards direct democracy. Participation is also contained in representative democracy where, the people

elect individuals to represent them and subsequently hold them to account for the decisions made on their behalf (Creighton 2005:14). In other words, all decisions made by the elected representatives should replicate the views of the people they represent. Thus, those decisions made should be in the public interest.

In order to understand the concept citizen power, it would be imperative to briefly refer to the definition of democracy. Rule by the people, is an accepted definition, it means that the people would have sufficient power to make and influence decisions on the issues that are of concern to them (Madumo 2011:56). More clearly, citizen power can be related to the 1864 address by Abraham Lincoln, which simplified the concept of democracy as, the government of the people, by the people and for the people (Heywood 2007:72). The explanation of the above statement affirms the people as playing a significant role in the operation of governmental affairs. As such all decisions made should be implemented by them, or at least involve them. After all, the higher degrees of this category of power will enhance and deepen democracy, where everyone will be positioned to express their concerns, for a decision to be made. Subsequently development will ensue. Accordingly, public participation is regarded as being meaningful and appropriately achieved only when citizen participation has been fully implemented (Bishop and Davis 2002:16). This means that for meaningful participation to occur, the first two phases, *i.e.* non-participation and tokenism, needs to be implemented prior to citizen power.

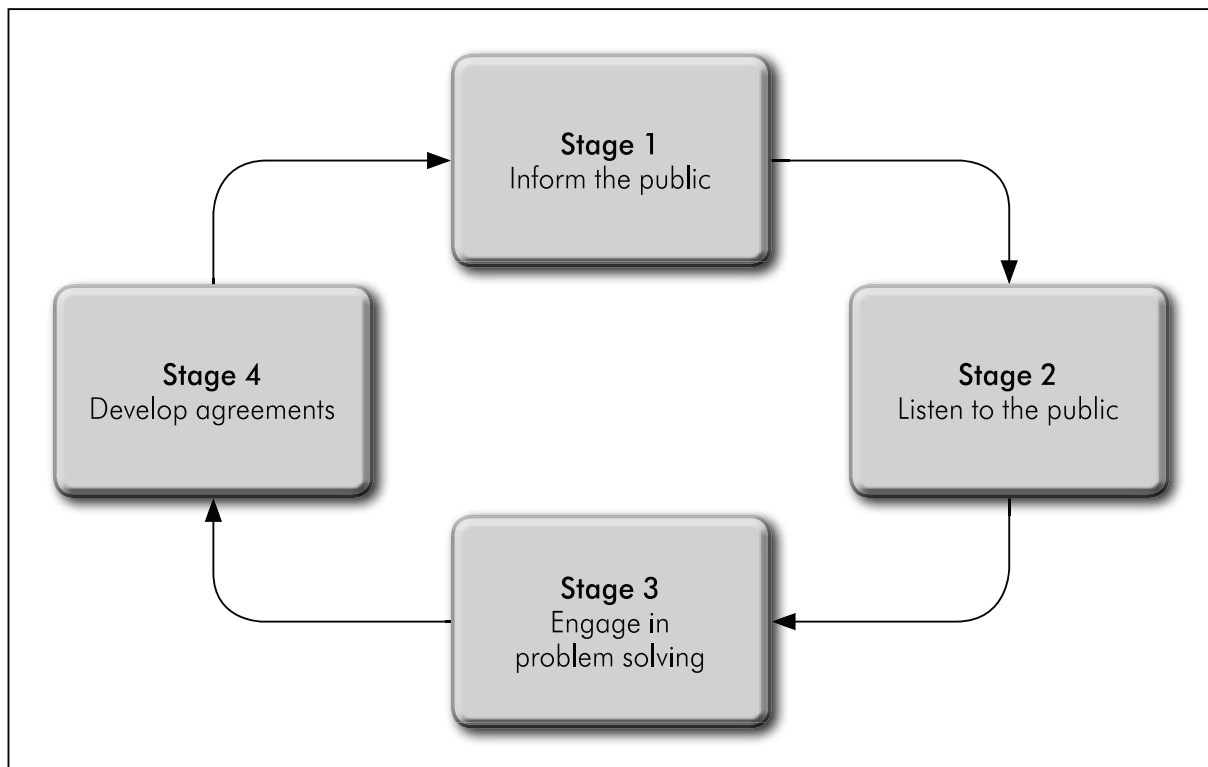
## **CONTINUUM APPROACH FOR EFFECTIVE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

Local government legislation makes provision for the establishment of ward committees within municipalities. The purpose of these ward committees is primarily to create an environment conducive for participatory democracy (Section 72 of the *Local Government: Municipal Structures Act* 117 of 1998). Thus, ward committees serve as structures that aim at enhancing public participation. This interpretation proceeds from the understanding that services rendered by the local government sphere should be aligned to the needs of the people. Du Plessis (2012:21) argues that the post democratic government in South Africa had to develop mechanisms, through legislation and other policies, which will ensure that public participation becomes a reality. The activity of public participation process can be explained better through a continuum. The continuum provides a step-by-step guidance for achieving effective public participation. The continuum of participation, as illustrated in Figure 1, is a useful tool that could be adopted by ward committees and utilised to achieve effective participation from the communities in municipalities.

Through the continuum, the process of public participation is explained from initiation through to the last stage (Creighton 2005:9). As per the illustration in Figure 1, the continuum of participation involves four stages and suggests that the foundational stages be satisfied prior to engaging in the following stage. The first stage of the continuum is *inform the public* (Creighton 2005:9). In the context of a municipality, this can be done through mainstream media, where the ward committees would inform the residents of the intention of a public participation gathering. The second stage is to *listen to the public* (Creighton 2005:9). This entails that the ward committees should afford the residents sufficient time to make their inputs and clearly state their concerns. The third stage, a municipality along with the people in attendance should strive to find amicable solutions through what Creighton (2005:9) terms *engagement in problem solving*. This is where the citizens become involved in collaboration with the municipality in an attempt to solve the problem (Ababio in Nzimakwe 2012:151). Lastly, both the municipality and residents should establish a consensus and *develop agreement* on what was discussed during the entire process (Creighton 2005:9). Madumo (2012:45) argues that the entire public participation process should ensure that municipalities achieve a goal of deepening local democracy.

After providing some understanding on the classification of the categories of participation and the application of the continuum approach, it would also be necessary to briefly explain the approaches to participation, namely; structured

**Figure 1: Continuum of participation**



Source: Adapted from Creighton (2005:9)

participation, open participation and informal participation as streamlined by Brynard (1996:46-47).

## **Structured participation**

Structured participation approach is defined by the legitimacy it possess to pursue and enhance public participation. In local government, ward committees are established by legislation to encourage and promote public participation. Through the structured approach, Nzimakwe (2012:153) argues that public participation legitimises municipalities (or even ward committees) by making participation acceptable to the communities. As such, municipalities are expected to follow a structured participation approach in pursuit of predetermined objectives.

## **Open participation**

The approach of open public participation is flexible and it creates a forum that seeks to invite individuals to participate in such a platform in their capacity as residents. Brynard (1996:47) assert that the advocacy of this approach is primarily based on the notion that the representatives should not be entrusted with the agenda of advancing development, because they might eventually support that of the authorities, over the interests of their constituents.

The convenience of such an approach, has a potential to improve the trust relation between the municipalities and the members of the community, in that, its processes facilitates the acceleration of development as every individual is expected to directly represent his/her own interest (Madumo 2011:57). Thus, open participation would generate an expectation that requires the formation of a forum where all stakeholders *inter alia* the residents, businesses, schools and non-governmental organisations, are summoned to discuss and share ideas on the matters concerning a particular area of jurisdiction. However, open participation inadvertently emphasises direct democracy, where individuals participate in the determination of fate of their society (Heywood 2007:73). In a contemporary democracy, open participation would not become as effective due to the rapid growing size of the communities.

## **Informal participation**

The approach of informal public participation is a compound of both the abovementioned approaches, namely; structured participation and open participation. This connotes that the identified public representatives and the community members acting in their individual capacity are afforded an opportunity to participate in platforms created, for them to raise their concerns



within the municipality (Brynard 1996:47). For instance, during the formulation of the integrated development plan (IDP), municipalities would invite communities to make proposals and submissions, regardless of representation.

## **COMMUNITY DYNAMICS IN PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

Participation is an activity that can only occur in the presence of the people (Bishop and Davis 2002:16). That is, the people as the contributors to agenda setting play a significant role of influencing the participation processes. The notion of public participation is originally intended to achieve community problem solving. It is therefore, critical to emphasise that decision making and planning should not be left completely to the elected representatives. This is observable in scenarios where the community members repeatedly complain that the authorities forced decisions upon them and that they were not afforded representation in the planning and decision making processes (Brynard, 1996a:135). In a study by Froschauer in 2010, the research assessed the implementation of the City of Johannesburg's Bus Rapid Transit system (BRT) and the discoveries were that, in the first phase of the implementation, the public transport operators could not agree with the government agencies on the specifics of the business model for future operations. Consequently what ought to be the continuum of participation was associated with high degrees of conflict. As a result of such a case, it can be emphasised that public participation cannot be a success if both the parties do not consider the needs of each one. For effective public participation to flourish, it is needful for the municipalities to acknowledge importance and explore stakeholder consultation forums (Bekink 2006:476).

It is expected of the communities to appreciate and achieve local democracy through participation, regardless of its level or degree. The theory of social contract stands out as a model that is being utilised in most settings of democratic governments. This allows the governed to participate by providing input to the local government matters in an attempt to realise their needs and expectations. Madumo (2011:62) argues that it is almost impossible for a model that promotes direct democracy to flourish in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as the population grows exponentially and it will also be problematic to co-ordinate participation fora, hence representation is the most favourable. Individuals within communities are represented through different structures and interest groups including; the non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community based organisations (CBOs), political parties, and various other civil society organisations (Madumo 2011:62).

Cloete and Meyer (2006:113) opine that the interest groups exist as long as specific issues are not legally on the government's agenda, or issues are contained but are not prioritised. As such, it could be affirmed that the role of

the interest groups is to propagate and lobby for support from the communities for particular policies to be included and prioritised in the government's agenda. As such, their participatory role in decision making process could be seen as supplementing the capacity of policy advocacy in communities.

In South Africa, the South African National Civics Organisation (SANCO) is one of the most important civil society movements that play a significant role in an attempt to influence and guide the local, provincial and national government legislation and policies (SANCO Constitution 2001). This is achieved through the appropriate co-ordination of the communities. As it was observed in the pre-democratic South Africa, SANCO was utilised as a means through which specific policies were advocated which ought to promote democracy thereby appreciating the basic needs, aspirations and the expectations of the members of the communities across South Africa (Zuern 2004:4).

## **ALIGNING SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY WITH PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

The basis for social contract theory advocates for a just society, where the people and their governors are fully aware of their responsibilities towards creating a just society. The fundamental elements underpinning the theory are that of ensuring justice and equality. Originally, social contract theory can be dated back to the ancient Greece, where Plato, a Greek philosopher, explored the concept in explaining how justice achieved and how it functions, in his work entitled *The Republic* (Friend 2004). Subsequently, Thomas Hobbes in 1651 enhanced the theory by identifying the four components that relate with the state of nature, namely; equality of power, equality of need, scarcity and limited altruism. Hobbes further argued that without these four features the state of nature would appear different. Following the thesis of Hobbes, John Locke, in 1690, augmented that the government obtains its authority through a social contract, however the premise of Locke's argument disapproves that of Hobbes. In other words, Locke disagreed with the four identified elements by Hobbes (Gauthier 1977:135).

Fox and Meyer (1996:120) connote social contract theory as a construct of government that believes that the origin of the state is based upon a contractual agreement between the civil society and the government. This means that the members of the society willingly entered into a contract with the government in order to sustain their general good and wellbeing. According to Heywood (2007:93) social contract theory aims at legitimising the organised society through a voluntary agreement amongst individuals.

In 1762, John-Jacques Rousseau, as one of the latter proponents of social contract theory identified direct democracy as the main underlying principle

of the construct and opined that individuals can only live in freedom if they live according to the rules that they have made themselves (Adams and Dyson 2007:75; Hanyane 2005:256). As such, public participation is also a key element in ensuring the legitimacy of local government and promoting local democracy in municipalities through ward committees. The notion of direct democracy advocates for an environment that requires active citizenry. This will according to Bishop and Davis (2002:15) propose a more intense participation, where a modern government will resort to the usage of direct institutional mechanisms such as local assemblies and referenda. The existence of ward committees in municipalities aims to bridge the gap between the municipalities and the communities they serve.

## **Public participation in a democratic local government**

In a democratic setting, politics are based on the assumption that the public will comply with legislation and regulations voluntarily (Dalton 2004:12). However, if the same public develops distrust with the politicians, the result could lead to a general breakdown of the relations between the public and a municipality and not the political party concerned (Dalton 2004:12). This reveals a thin line between a municipality and the political party in charge, as perceived by the public. Since democratisation in South Africa in 1994, the notion of public participation was popularised during the time when the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) was initiated as the government's strategic position. Through this programme, the government strongly encouraged people to participate in communal affairs and the campaign came about as a response to the practice of South Africans of not showing appreciation in participating in governmental issues (Bekker 1996:32). According to Clapper (1996:52) public participation encourages the model of direct democracy, thereby creating a platform for communities to directly participate in decision making and other governmental activities. Furthermore, Clapper (1996:52) warns that for a variety of reasons the public have their own perception of how public participation should be and individuals within the communities do not afford the same, equal effort and commitment to it. Modern democracies have their own challenges which could be attributed to various factors. The following section will attempt to uproot and clarify some of the challenges facing public participation in municipalities.

## **Challenges facing public participation in local government**

Public participation is sometimes a prolonged process that involves the interaction between the people and their governing institutions. Public participation tends to establish the potential for conflict and because of governmental cumbersome processes, hence it often becomes a tedious process (Heywood 2007:74).

It is noteworthy to realise and understand that the members of a particular community are not homogeneous. Naturally, human beings are not all the same, even in respect of the views and beliefs they possess on specific issues of communal interest, as such, when people are actively involved in government activities the emergence of conflict should be anticipated, hence they often reach an agreement through compromises (Heywood 2007:10). However, such a mutual concession may eventually prove to be an ineffective solution. This mutual agreement may therefore, still require the governing body to apply its discretionary authority (Ile and Mapuva 2010:31).

It could be argued that the challenges facing public participation in municipalities are two-fold. First are systematic challenges. Systematic challenges are the challenges that directly link with public participation. These are created by the political milieu within which participation ought to occur. Secondly, the structural challenges. These include the challenges related to the mechanisms that could be utilised to promote public participation in local government. Systematic challenges stimulate the structural challenges. For instance, public participation could be perceived differently by communities under different regimes (Dalton 2004:6). In a constitutional democracy like South Africa for example, it could be expected that public participation flows from legislative prescripts and aims to address genuine community issues than the practice in an undemocratic political setting. Systematic challenges could be caused by a variety of factors including the:

- legislation enacted;
- political environment; and
- quality of community members.

In terms of the structural challenges, ward committees in municipalities are established to enhance public participation in municipalities. Consequently, the efficacy through which the ward committees achieve this objective is doubtful. According to Thornhill and Madumo (2011:134); and Naidu (2008:87) these challenges are as a result of ward committees lacking:

- original power;
- recognition and legitimacy;
- political stability;
- the focus and clarity in their responsibilities; and
- the capacity to promote genuine public participation.

Notwithstanding the identified challenges, ward committees play an important role in municipalities, and most significantly if they function properly, could be the effective mechanism used in determining the community needs. In order for ward committees to effectively perform their primary role, it is imperative that they create

a forum for citizens to raise their issues and influence policy pertaining to their needs. This will ensure that a worthwhile contribution is made by the community and will further enhance community participation in municipal decision making.

## **EFFECTIVE PROMOTION OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

For municipalities to be viewed as being transparent, they require a system of information dissemination that is effective. Information can be dispensed through various means of communication, for example through the media. This is significant because it assists both the government and communities to facilitate public participation and ensure collective decision making in municipalities. It should be noted that, as a two-way dynamic process, communication requires the participation of both parties for it to be a success (Madumo 2011:71). By using the public participation platform, which should be initiated and organised by the municipality, through ward committees, municipalities should be in a better position to convey its vision and invite the relevant stakeholders to partake in governmental affairs. This will ensure the effective delivery of the required goods and services, as anticipated by the respective municipal community.

According to Creighton (2005:18-19) the following features will advantage municipalities to improve public participation:

- Improved quality of decisions;
- Minimising cost and delay;
- Consensus building;
- Increased ease of implementation;
- Avoiding worst case confrontations;
- Maintaining credibility and legitimacy;
- Anticipating public concerns and attitudes; and
- Developing civil society.

Brynard (1996:41) argues that participation can be made effective through allowing the community members to provide an input in the decisions-making process. This will improve the quality of the decisions and ensure that ambiguity is cleared in terms of the required needs and services. The effective co-operation of the municipal authority and the public could derive the synergy where maximum provision of public services of high quality is achieved. It is thus deduced that the involvement of communities in participation, policy and decision making implies that even the not so popular decisions, would be supported by the community by default. The rationale for this could be that, community members would believe to be responsible for such decisions, regardless of whether these decisions are in their support or not. As such, the

process of public participation would develop a sense of ownership among both the municipality and the public. For example, even if policies turn out to be the unexpected upon implementation, the community members would take upon the responsibility to improve them rather than rejecting them.

If community members become more distrustful of politicians and the political process, the result has a potential to affect the relationship between the government and its citizens (Dalton 2004:12). Once a decision is made through a consultative process by involving the people, the implementation tends to be easier. Public participation will create a forum for both the municipalities and the communities to appreciate the opportunity available, to express their needs, expectations and responsibilities in a cordial atmosphere. As a result, Creighton (2005:19) argues that it is much likely for the community members to accept a policy or legislation that they have significantly contributed towards throughout the process of its establishment. Uncertainty of the required services by the communities could lead to the municipalities investing money in activities of which communities are not interested. For example, in May 2014, the community of Diepkloof, Soweto protested against the installation of prepaid water meters in their area, arguing that they were not consulted by the City of Johannesburg (SA Local Government Research Centre 2014:32). Instead, public participation will be instrumental in ensuring that a direct contact between the members of the community and their municipality is maintained. Throughout the process of public participation, an opportunity to synthesise the conflicting views from the two parties is created. Hence the municipality and community members co-operate in order to ensure a long term commitment.

In a municipal environment, consensus building is stimulated by a process of integrated development planning. Thus a framework is initiated by the municipality in consultation with the communities to deliver services within the anticipated timeframe and reasonable financial means (*White Paper on Local Government*, 1998:27). The perception, members of the community have about public organisations determines the level of the confidence that the people will have in those organisations. As a result, such a confidence could be imparted in those institutions through the participation of the ordinary people in issues that are of public interest. This is specifically important as it could result in promoting the credibility and legitimacy of such organisations, thereby, encouraging democratic values and principles.

## **Improving public participation to facilitate efficient delivery of services**

It should be recognised that it is imperative for the process of decision making in the local government sphere to be inclusive, *i.e.* to involve the communities. The

involvement of the communities can augment substantial benefits including, a fulfilled and supportive public and the enhancement of a stronger and effective democracy (Thomas 1995:2). As a result public participation could become an institutional model, which is supported by legislation that promotes the developmental agenda of the society through the utilisation of the local government institutions.

A developmental local government is a community oriented approach and its programmes and activities are broad and inclusive. Kotze and Kellerman (1997:36) insist that as a result of this community oriented approach, the government will encourage public participation, and consequently support the programmes and activities that seek to develop and benefit the communities. Thus, public participation will lead to a situation where the local sphere of government receives a worthwhile contribution from the communities and this will assist in determining the quality and quantity of public services delivered (Madumo 2012:44). According to Govender, Reddy and Pillay (2011:197) participation as a process of decision making brings with it commitment, that is, the greater effort in ensuring that outcomes are achieved successfully.

South Africa is a complex state with prominent elements of liberal democratic system, where the principles of, *inter alia*, public participation, equality, political tolerance and the rule of law are conspicuous and promoted (Edigheji 2005:3). Through democratic and developmental processes, public participation remains at the centre as a result of the positioning of its process in municipalities. The promotion of public participation will intensify developmental local government in which the needs of all the people, especially those from poor and vulnerable communities, are met by a capable local government (Koma 2012:109). Public participation is a fundamental element for achieving citizen power. Through public participation processes, empowerment is ensured and the redistribution of power is directed at the people who are excluded from the political and economic activities that form the basis for decision making, for the improvement of their wellbeing and development (Pearce 2010:230). Local government system, including ward committees, non-governmental organisations and community based organisations, have a collective responsibility to accomplish the mandate of encouraging involvement of the communities in issues pertinent to local government. In order for the development of the local government sphere to ensue, it is therefore important to promote local democracy by enhancing participatory processes in municipalities across the country.

## **CONCLUSION**

The purpose of the article was to contextualise public participation as is applicable to the South African local government. The literature surveyed, has indicated that

public participation is a concept that can signify any process in a relationship between those who are governed and their governors. As such, the discussion focused on the importance of utilising Arnstein's classification model by analysing of the *ladder of citizen participation*. The article further investigated the role that is ought to be played by the communities in public participation and the benefit, accompanying public participation toward the contribution to the development of local democracy in South African municipalities. In particular, the discussion was based on the notion of improving the delivery of services in a participatory democracy, taking into account the mechanism that allowed community members to participate in policy and decision making. The theory of social contract was explored and the study further noted how this construct ensures that the organised communities are legitimised and how social contract theory eases the implementation of public participation. The role of municipalities in instigating effective participatory processes was highlighted. Importantly, the challenges facing public participation in the local government sphere were addressed. As a result the study identified methods that could be utilised by the municipalities to achieve effective public participation. The article also articulated on how the improvement of public participation will ensure the development of communities.

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