

Factors motivating community participation in the Bushbuckridge municipality in the Mpumalanga province of South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Participation is a fundamental component of any community enrichment programme. Current knowledge and understanding about what motivates communities to participate in local community initiatives are however limited, especially in a South African context. This study aimed to identify the factors that motivates local community members to participate in the construction and running of early childhood development (ECD) centres in the Bushbuckridge municipality in the Province of Mpumalanga. To achieve this aim, we engaged with Team Frank Africa – a non-profit organization (NPO) that builds and runs early childhood development (ECD) centres in the municipality with the assistance of local community members. Two focus group discussions were held with local community members, and two interviews were held with Team Frank members to identify what motivates local community participation in these ECDs. Findings revealed that community participation in this context is largely driven by self-interest, and a sense of ownership. Overall findings reaffirm the fact that community participation is a complex process, and its determinants are highly influenced by personal and socio-economic circumstances. We believe that the study contributes to our understanding of community participation in a rural South African context as well as contributes knowledge to the sustainability of future community development programmes in similar contexts.

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Introduction

Community development serves as the cornerstone for creating resilient, empowered, and thriving societies (Swanepoel & De Beer, 2011), and is one of the most appropriate ways to address South Africa's unique underdevelopment and inequality (Patel, 2015). In fact, community development is vital to the future success of South Africa as it entails a collective effort to enhance the quality of life for all members of a community, addressing their unique needs and aspirations. Through community development, individuals can be provided with opportunities for education (Veen, 2003), employment

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(Toit, 2005), and social support (Dolan, 2008), which can uplift marginalized and disadvantaged groups (Chaskin, 2001). Importantly, community development and community participation are inextricably linked with the latter being the engine that fuels community development, as it involves the active involvement of local residents in decision-making, planning, and implementation of initiatives that directly affect their lives (Arnstein, 1969). When community members participate, their collective wisdom and unique insights can identify and prioritize the most pressing needs and opportunities within the community. This grassroots engagement can not only empower individuals by giving them a voice in shaping their own destinies (Maton et al., 2006) but can ensure that development efforts are more relevant, sustainable, and responsive to the community's aspirations (Laverack, 2001). Essentially, community participation is the catalyst that propels community development forward, enabling communities to harness their collective strength to achieve lasting social, economic, and cultural advancements.

There is a growing need for local community participation in South Africa (see Mazinyo & Nel, 2010; Phago, 2008). This is due to a number of reasons including the fact that the country faces significant challenges, including poverty, unemployment, and inadequate infrastructure. Local participation allows communities to identify their needs and priorities, ensuring that development initiatives are tailored to address their specific issues effectively. Local community participation also empowers residents to take ownership of their communities which can lead to greater accountability among local leaders and officials and can also boost residents' confidence and leadership skills. Finally, South Africa has a history of exclusion and marginalization (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005). Active community participation can help ensure that all voices are heard, including those from historically disadvantaged groups, which promotes inclusivity and social justice. To address these, and other, developmental challenges in South Africa, non-governmental, and non-profit organizations (NGOs and NPOs) often provide communities with facilities, services and access to basic resources themselves or these organizations partner with local and/or national government departments to do so. Non-governmental organizations in South Africa are typically independent entities that operate without direct government control and are most often established by individuals, groups, or communities to address various social, environmental, or humanitarian issues. These organizations are driven by a specific mission or set of objectives, and they aim to make a positive impact on society in which they operate. In a similar way, NPOs also work towards specific missions or objectives aimed at serving the public interest (addressing social, humanitarian, environmental, or cultural needs) but NPOs can be either non-governmental or government-affiliated. Regardless, in order for any initiative to be successful in making an impact on the lives of the communities in which they operate, they need community 'buy-in' and, ideally, community participation in their operations. In fact, community participation should not be imposed on individuals but rather needs to emerge from the community itself. Successful community participation rather is driven by several factors, as highlighted by Arnstein (1969). In his classic article, the researcher emphasizes the importance of higher rungs on the ladder, such as partnership and citizen control. Genuine partnership, where community members collaborate in decision-making and implementation processes, fosters a sense of ownership and ensures that participation is more than a symbolic gesture. According to the researcher successful participation hinges on factors like effective communication, trust-building, inclusivity,

and the recognition of diverse perspectives within the community. A number of researchers have significantly expanded on the concept of community participation in the decades following Arnstein's seminal work. Key contributions include Rappaport (1987) who emphasized the importance of individual and community control in understanding community participation dynamics as well as Cornwall (2008) who critically examined various models of participation and introduced the idea of 'spaces' for participation, distinguishing between 'invited', 'created', and 'claimed' spaces. Other contributions include Zimmerman (1995), Innes and Booher (2010), and Dryzek (2000). Collectively, these works have deepened our understanding of how community participation functions within various contexts and provided a more nuanced, multi-level understanding of participation and the complexity of collaborative decision-making processes. Some research is, however, shifting towards a post-collaborative period, moving beyond the idealistic-critical dichotomy to adopt a more pragmatic and empirical perspective in analysing participatory mechanisms in urban planning (see, for example, Bacqué & Gauthier, 2011; Healey, 2009). This evolution reflects ongoing efforts to understand and improve citizen participation processes in urban development.

A large number of researchers have identified factors which motivate community participation in a variety of contexts (see Fien & Anderson, 2006; O'Donoghue & Punch, 2003; Pretty, 1995). While informative, the vast majority of this work has been undertaken in the Global North, with much less known about what motivates local community participation in the Global South, more broadly, and in South Africa, more specifically. The aim of this study was to identify what factors motivate community participation in the Bushbuckridge municipality in Mpumalanga. To do this we engaged with a non-profit organization (NPO) – Team Frank Africa – who construct early childhood development centres (ECDs) in the municipality. Team Frank Africa partner with local communities to build and run these centres. More specifically, we used qualitative techniques including two focus group discussion and two one-on-one interviews to answer the research question: what motivates community participation in the Bushbuckridge municipality in Mpumalanga (using Team Frank as a case study)? We believe the study will enhance our local theoretical and practical understanding of community participation in a rural South African context and contribute towards strengthening and ensuring the sustainability of future community development programmes. The rest of the article is structured as follows: first, we provide a review of the extant literature which examines studies that have highlighted the factors which motivate community participation. We then outline the theoretical framework which acts as the intellectual scaffolding upon which the study is constructed. The data and method methods follow before we highlight the main themes identified during the data collection phase of the research. Finally, we outline the implications of our work and then conclude.

Literature review

Community participation involves a partnership between the providers and the community, emphasizing the importance of both parties to forming partnerships. It is an integral part of the community development process, but has only recently been explicitly recognized as a major goal in itself. A number of studies have been undertaken highlighting what motivates community participation across a number of

diverse contexts (Chitambo et al., 2002; de Freitas & Martin, 2015; Luluquisen & Pettis, 2014). For example, a study conducted by Mfenguza (2007) indicated that high or active participation is most likely when different stakeholders involved in a project or programme are satisfied with the level at which they are involved. This includes, among others, creating a welcoming and inclusive environment where community members feel valued and heard (de Weger et al., 2020). Recognizing and rewarding community contributions by acknowledging participants publicly or offering small incentives like access to events, discounts, or merchandise may also increase community participation. Previous studies have also found that soliciting feedback and implementing community suggestions in developmental plans increases community participation (see Veronesi & Keasey, 2015). This involves seeking regular input from community members and demonstrating that their opinions matter. Durey et al. (2016) found that involving the community in decision-making processes and giving them ownership over community initiatives drove participation in Australia while Hamamoto et al. (2009) found that creating quick and tangible wins for community members increased participation in the United States. The researchers noted that this can be operationalized in a number of ways including offering educational resources, or workshops that can help community members enhance their skills or knowledge in relevant areas. This benefits not only individuals personally but also strengthens the overall expertise within the community. Other motivating factors found by researchers include financial gain and altruism (Bakar et al., 2012), community ideals (Dragouni & Fouseki, 2018), and religious, social, and/or traditional obligations (Haldane et al., 2019; Skidmore et al., 2006). Across all interventions it is important to be aware of the fact that a sense of community can have a catalytic effect on local action by affecting the perception of the community on the environment, social relations, and their perceived sense of control (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990).

Relatedly, factors that limit community participation are equally varied. For example, Boakye-Agyei (2009) found that historical, social developmental priorities and contextual characteristics may hinder local participation in community projects in Ghana while Sule (2004) found that imposing plans and/or policies on communities without their involvement greatly limited community participation in Nigeria. According to Aref (2010), a lack of access to information and understanding of policy can also be barriers to community participation. Accordingly, Mazinyo and Nel (2010) found that a lack of communication discouraged community participation in the Duncan Village township in the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality. They found that the nature of communication between relevant stakeholders restricted participation. In the Western Cape, Chitambo et al. (2002) noted how political differences greatly affected the strategies of informing the communities about the district development processes which limited proper engagement. With regards to community participation in education specifically, Shaeffer (1992) found that the degree of community participation is particularly low in rural and impoverished regions due to a lack of appreciation of the overall objectives of an initiative as well as a mismatch between what parents expect of education and what the school is seen as providing. Uemura (1999) also found that if the community believe that education is essentially the task of the State they are less likely to be engaged. Other limiting factors include the unequal distribution of work between members of the community (Haldane et al., 2019). Accordingly, a highly divided and/or entitled

community that believe that they are helpless, and that the government and/or any NGO or NPO should provide the services struggle to participate effectively in community upliftment (Skidmore et al., 2006).

Whilst much is known about what drives community participation internationally (Aryeh-Adjei, 2021; Boakye-Agyei, 2009; Sule, 2004; Wordu, 2018) much less is known about what drives or restricts community participation in South Africa. One notable exception is Davids et al. (2021) who investigated the practice and challenges with regards to community participation at the local level within selected rural communities in South Africa. The researcher found that community participation, specifically in rural areas, is practiced as a once-off event instead of being viewed as a process that is comprised of interrelated activities. He concluded that effective community participation requires continual engagement across the entire policy planning, decision making, and implementation stages. Understanding what drives or restricts community participation in South Africa is important because community participation makes any community initiative more effective, equitable, and legitimate in the eyes of the provider as well as the community itself (Skidmore et al., 2006).

Theoretical framework

The study is guided by the social movement theory which is a theory commonly used to explain why social mobilization occurs; the forms under which it manifests, as well as potential social, cultural, and political consequences (Lachapelle & Austin, 2014). According to McCarthy and Zald (1977) the theory argues that social movements cannot succeed merely through the anger of residents; but rather through the proactive participation of the community. The theory has previously been used in South Africa to explain social and municipal unrest (Marais et al., 2008), unionism (von Holdt, 2002), as well as the armed struggle in the South African anti-apartheid movement (Seidman, 2001), among others. Social movement theory can be used to explain community participation in this study because it provides a framework for understanding how individuals come together to pursue collective goals – namely, the running of an ECD. Moreover, the theory highlights the importance of shared grievances, collective identity, and the mobilization of resources, which are all key factors in driving people to participate in a community activity aimed at improving education outcomes in an impoverished community. By analysing how social movements form, organize, and sustain themselves, the theory can also help to explain why and how this particular community was able to rally around this common, and collective, issue. Within the context of this study, four main approaches of social movement theory are examined: resource mobilization, political opportunity structures, framing, and collective identity. Resource mobilization refers to all activities involved in securing new and additional resources for the community; in the context of the present study, it refers to the early childhood development centres. By resources, we refer to financial assets, human capital (skills and knowledge), physical infrastructure, natural resources, and social networks. Broadly speaking, political opportunity structures refer to signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements (Tarrow, 1996). More specifically, they refer to the government policies and the political discourse guiding the development of ECDs in the community. Rural and/or tribal areas

in South Africa are often governed by authorities that are politically leaning but still largely self-governing (Khan et al., 2006). Framing refers to the means by which a social group negotiates its inner identity in a way that leads to the interpretation of the relevant issues and/or events to outsiders (Benford & Snow, 2000). Frames in particular describe the cause of a problem, propose possible solutions and call for collective action (Engels & Müller, 2019). Regarding the current study, we intend to ascertain how the ECD is perceived, understood, and discussed within a community. Finally, collective identity refers to a specific kind of belonging to a certain group. In the context of the current study, this pertains to the community's sense of belonging resilience and shared goals and values.

In this study we examine how suitable the four main approaches of social movement theory are in explaining why individuals in this community choose to participate in voluntary community-orientated behaviours. Moreover, the theory will be used to explore how having a greater involvement of people using the services and facilities for themselves (i.e. the early childhood development centres) motivates them to participate in their development.

Study site

The geographical focus area for this study was the Bushbuckridge Local Municipality located in Mpumalanga. Bushbuckridge covers a total area of approximately 10 km² and has an estimated total population of roughly 540,000 inhabitants, of which almost 99% are black African (Statistics South Africa, 2011). The population of the municipality has grown exponentially over the past few years mainly due to large-scale migration into the area (Rugunanana & Xulu-Gama, 2022). The municipality is poor with almost a third of the population relying on social grants while 24% earn almost R4800 annually (Statistics South Africa [SSA], 2011), which is approximating the national poverty line. Importantly, educational attainment in the municipality is extremely low. Of the individuals aged 20 and above, only 40% have successfully completed primary school, only 32% have completed secondary education while only seven percent of the population hold a matric certificate (SSA, 2011).

In this study we visited a number of local communities located within Bushbuckridge including Hluvukani, Gottenberg, Clare, Welverdland and Buffelshoek. These communities house a number of early childhood development centres that have been built by a Canadian non-profit organization (NPO) called Team Frank. The NPO was formed in May 2002 in honour of Frank Joseph Doyle, who died in the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York on the 9th of November 2001. Team Frank was developed to preserve his memory by improving the life circumstances of children living in impoverished communities in the developing world. This is done through the construction of early childhood development centres (ECDs). A number of ECDs have been built throughout the developing world including in a number of locations throughout South Africa. One area where Team Frank has a presence is in Bushbuckridge where Team Frank has built five centres since 2018. At the planning stage of each ECD centre, the Team Frank Africa team liaise with the local provincial government in Bushbuckridge in order to identify areas that are most in need of these types of



Figure 1. Msalela, one of the early development centres built by team Frank Africa.

facilities. Support is also obtained from local tribal authorities governing the area – this is done with the assistance of a local community facilitator. Thereafter, the community – through the local provincial government – is approached and provides appropriate land and guarantees volunteer labour for the running of the ECD after its construction. At the design stage of each ECD centre, a local steering committee is formed from the existing community that makes all the decisions pertaining to the construction and running of the centres. The community is engaged continuously and all individuals are eligible to be on the steering committee. The committee consists mostly of local community members who volunteer to serve on the committee with no remuneration. Local suppliers are sourced for the construction material, and volunteers are sourced to run the centres once they have been completed. **The governance structure of Team Frank is a collaborative model that balances operational leadership and strategic oversight. The Team Frank Africa Director is responsible for the ongoing management of the ECDs in close collaboration with the main funders, who provide financial support and strategic guidance. The partnership between the director and funders ensures that key decisions align with both the organization’s mission and the expectations of its financial stakeholders. This structure allows for efficient day-to-day management while maintaining accountability and sustainability through funder oversight.** The on-going management of the ECDs is undertaken by the Team Frank Africa Director in close collaboration with the main funders. Donations are predominantly obtained from individuals’ residing in Canada and the United States and these funds are directly used to build and run the ECDs.

Figure 1 shows one of the newly constructed ECDs built in Bushbuckridge. The building on the left is the kitchen and on the far right are two classrooms that can accommodate up to 35 children each. Team Frank finances the construction of the ECD but local community members are encouraged to participate in the running of these facilities once they have been completed. Importantly, they are not paid for their services but are rather encouraged to participate for the upliftment and for the benefit of their community.

Data and method

Research approach and design

A qualitative research approach was adopted in this study to identify the factors that motivate community participation in the Bushbuckridge municipality. Qualitative research methods are of paramount importance when discussing community participation due to their ability to delve deep into the nuanced aspects of this multifaceted phenomenon (J. Creswell & Poth, 2017). Using qualitative techniques allows researchers to uncover the intricate motivations, perceptions, and experiences that drive individuals to engage actively in community initiatives (Patton, 2015). By applying qualitative methods, scholars can explore the rich tapestry of voices within a community, understanding the unique cultural, social, and contextual factors that influence participation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This approach not only captures the complexities of community participation but also empowers community members to share their stories and perspectives, making them active collaborators in the research process (Kawulich, 2005). Furthermore, qualitative research methods facilitate the identification of barriers and facilitators to participation, enabling practitioners and policymakers to design more effective and tailored community engagement strategies (Miles et al., 2019).

Two types of qualitative research methods were used in this study, namely focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Both used group conversations as a means of capturing data. Group conversations allow for knowledge sharing and a deeper understanding of a phenomenon that occurs through unstructured meaning-making processes (Taherdoost, 2021). Moreover, they are invaluable for examining community participation as they provide a platform for nuanced exploration of diverse perspectives within the community (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Finally, engaging community members in dialogue through focus group discussions or other group-based qualitative methods fosters an environment conducive to uncovering the depth of motivations, challenges, and aspirations that underlie their participation (Patton, 2015). They also form an integral part in obtaining information about how people experience the world.

Population and sample

The research population for the study consisted of all individuals within the Bushbuckridge municipality who have had some engagement with the ECDs either as parents, caregivers, workers or volunteers. Availability sampling was used to recruit participants in this study. Availability sampling is a crucial method when conducting research in resource-poor contexts for several reasons. First, in these settings, researchers often face significant challenges, such as limited access to comprehensive sampling frames, sparse resources for data collection, and logistical constraints (Bernard, 2017). Second, this type of sampling method is pragmatic in such situations as it allows researchers to select participants or data points based on their accessibility and willingness to participate, making it a cost-effective and feasible approach (J. W. Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Moreover, it enables the inclusion of voices and perspectives that might otherwise be excluded from research due to constraints like geographic isolation, lack of formal records, or low literacy rates. While not without limitations, such as potential bias and a lack of representativeness, availability sampling becomes a necessary and pragmatic

strategy in resource-poor contexts, ensuring that research efforts can proceed despite constrained circumstances and ultimately contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Using this sampling method two focus groups were convened at two separate locations. One focus group consisted of 12 participants, the other focus group consisted of 15 participants. Both focus groups consisted of local community members, one local government representative as well as the researcher. Two semi-structured interviews were also held: one with the Director of Team Frank Africa as well as one with a trustee of Team Frank.

It is important to note that availability sampling and a small sample size were justified in this study due to the logistical and contextual constraints of conducting research in this unique location. Given the geographically dispersed nature of the municipality and the limited resources available, selecting participants based on accessibility allowed for a more feasible and efficient data collection process. The focus on specific communities within Bushbuckridge, particularly those where Team Frank has established early childhood development (ECD) centres, was necessary to align with the study's objectives. Moreover, the socio-economic and educational challenges prevalent in the area meant that large-scale data collection would have been difficult to implement. A smaller, more manageable sample allowed for in-depth engagement with participants and ensured richer qualitative insights, particularly regarding the community-driven approach to ECD development. Since the study sought to understand specific experiences and perspectives within these communities, we felt that a targeted, availability-based approach was appropriate to capture relevant and meaningful data.

Data collection

The first phase of the data collection was to undertake two focus group conversations to allow participants to share their experiences in the development and running of the ECDs. The participants in the two focus group conversations were aged between 35 to 70 years, and all resided in the Bushbuckridge municipality. The group conversations took place at two ECDs on two consecutive days. The conversations consisted mainly of open-ended questions which allowed the participants to share their perspectives openly. These conversations were conducted in Xitsonga (the local language of Bushbuckridge), and ran for approximately two hours each. In order to create an environment where participants could discuss any topic, we enlisted the support of a prominent local community leader who facilitated both group conversations. A conversational approach was adopted because it was imperative that all participants felt that the research space was conducive for them to speak freely. The aim of these discussions was to examine the participants' attitude to engaging with Team Frank and investigate the way in which they express their feelings and experiences that they face on a day-to-day basis with the ECD.

The second phase of the data collection involved two one-on-one semi-structured interviews. One with the Director of Team Frank Africa as well as with a trustee of Team Frank. These two participants were selected because they have been at the forefront of the development of ECDs in the Bushbuckridge municipality under Team Frank since its inception in the community in 2018. Together they have overseen the development of five schools in the municipality and were best placed to provide insight into the

motivations behind community participation in this context. Semi-structured interviews combine the technique of both structured and unstructured interviews in that the interviewer has a set of open-ended questions prepared beforehand but allows for participants to ask questions themselves. This mode of interview encourages trust, respect, understanding and empathy which are the key elements of effective communication. Interviews were held by both researchers in English – as both participants were fluent in English – and were unstructured but guided by a series of questions. Due to the fact that these were discussion-led interviews, participants were not restricted in their answers and were given the freedom to express their opinions outside of the proposed scope.

Data analysis and verification

Both focus groups were conducted in Xitsonga, the indigenous language spoken in Bushbuckridge, ensuring cultural relevance and participant comfort. The audio recordings of these sessions were transcribed verbatim in Xitsonga and then meticulously translated into English to facilitate analysis by the primary researcher. This dual-language approach aimed to maintain the authenticity of participants' expressions while enabling comprehensive analysis in English. The data was subjected to thematic analysis using appropriate software, a qualitative research method used for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. This process began with the preparation of the data, which involved familiarization with the transcripts through repeated reading. The next step involved coding the data, where significant segments of the text were labelled with codes that encapsulated key ideas or concepts. These codes were then organized into initial themes, which represented broader patterns across the data set.

Subsequently, these initial themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately captured the underlying data. This iterative process involved cross-checking themes against the data to confirm their validity and coherence. The semi-structured interviews, conducted in English, followed a similar process of audio recording, transcription, and thematic analysis to ensure consistency in the methodological approach. Throughout the analysis, rigorous checks were conducted to ensure the accuracy, consistency, and reliability of the data. This included triangulating findings with raw data, reviewing translations, and maintaining consistency in coding and theme development. By doing so, the research aimed to ensure that the derived themes accurately reflected the real-world phenomena and perspectives described by participants, thereby enhancing the study's credibility and trustworthiness.

Results

The main aim of this study was to answer the question: what motivates community participation in the Bushbuckridge municipality in Mpumalanga (using Team Frank as a case study)? During the data collection phase of our research a number of central themes emerged that provided answers to this question. Three factors in particular were found to motivate community participation in the running of the ECD centres in

Bushbuckridge: self-interest, a sense of ownership, and a sense of guardianship. These are outlined in more detail below: -

Self-interest

Participants explained that their involvement with Team Frank allowed them to play a more active role in their children's education. In this sense, their motivation to participate was driven by self-interest. They believed that children learn better and faster while they are young, and the participants maintain that by participating they are helping to provide the local children with a strong foundation that will positively impact them for the rest of their lives.

It is important to catch them while they are still young (Focus group #1; member #FG1)

I am a grandparent and I want to ensure that my grandchildren go to a clean and proper school (Focus group #1; member #FG2)

Participants also indicated that the willingness to participate is driven by the knowledge that the ECDs are safe, well-resourced facilities where the local children can be largely free of the signs of physical and social disorder inherent in their community. The motivation is also driven by the knowledge that early childhood education plays a pivotal role in shaping an individual's later life outcomes as it lays the foundation for cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioural development, providing essential skills and knowledge that are crucial throughout one's life.

Most of the parents are motivated to participate because they want to ensure that the children go to a clean and safe place and will not possibly be cut by pieces of bottles or bitten by snakes. (Focus group #2; member #FG3)

If the kids have a good start, they have a promising future. It might look like a drop in the ocean, but studies show that children that have gone to a good preschool do well in life (Focus group #1; member #FG2)

A sense of ownership

A sense of ownership was found to be a powerful motivator for community participation in this study. Ownership instils a feeling of personal investment and responsibility among community members. Participants felt that their voices were being heard (process) and were part of something bigger in their community.

The ECD centres are our community pride, they have become the talk of most villages. Everyone says that they have never seen well-established facilities like this one, therefore it is our responsibility as a community to ensure that it remains like this (Focus group #1; member #FG6)

This sense of ownership is manifest by the fact that the ECDs are protected by community members themselves. Indeed, individuals that reside close to the centres have taken it upon themselves to informally guard the ECDs from theft and vandalism.

Something as simple as a goat is removed immediately by members of the community because they may vandalise the jungle gym (Focus group #1; member #FG5)

Notably, each ECD has a community garden built on-site. The planting of a community garden was proposed by local community members during the construction phase of the first ECD in the municipality and it has now become a mandate for each ECD centre to have a garden. In this way a sense of ownership in outcome is established in that it was the community themselves who made the decision to plant a garden in each ECD. The participants noted that the garden has fostered a sense of ownership among the community with their maintenance being the purview of the local community.

Centres like these become centres for the community. Many activities can be initiated by the community. The garden was also an idea from the community, they applied it because they saw it working somewhere. Remember, children eat everyday therefore, to supplement what they are buying from the shop they have a garden (Team Frank Trustee)

A sense of ownership of distribution is also established in that the community garden not only provided food for learners at the ECD centres but any excess produce is sold to the local community at prices lower than those of the local supermarkets. The money they make from this endeavour assists in the daily running of the centres (i.e. the volunteers use the money to attend workshops to upskill).

The garden is greatly integrated in schools' nutritional programmes; the women who prepare the food usually harvest the vegetables depending on the meal that will be cooked on that specific day (Focus group #1; member #FG2)

Most of the parents bring their children here, because of the menu that we serve. Our food is of good quality and some of the parents complain that the children do not want the food that they serve at home (Focus group #2; member #FG9)

When the vegetables are ready for harvest, we can harvest some for our families and feed the children in the centres, which is the main reason why we plant. In cases when we obtain large yields, we sell them to buy daily bread. (Focus group #2; member #FG2)

Guardianship

Guardianship serves as a critical mechanism for fostering inclusive and equitable communities. In rural areas, the broader community are often viewed as 'guardians' of the children left in their care. This sense of guardianship is important particularly in the social and moral upbringing of children (Segalo & Rambuda, 2018). Participants noted that by participating in the running of the ECDs, they were able to act as a suitable guardian to the children in their community and offset any dangers and/or harms that they are exposed to at home.

'Teachers help take care of our children, we know that our children are safe, secured and members of the community are allowed to bring their children in cases of emergency, whether registered or not'. (Focus group #2; member #FG12)

'It is a safe haven where we drop off our children when going to work. Our children are not left behind to play in the in the streets unattended but instead they are taken care of. They are not losing their future' (Focus group #2; member #FG3)

The kids, most of the children from the local and neighbouring communities attend here. Without the kids we would not be motivated to wake up and come to work every morning. We want a better future for the children, the children are the most important part of the initiative. (Focus group #1; member #FG1)

The parents notice the love that we have for the children, they see how we take care of their children, they love and respect us. This encourages us to continue teaching. There is a strong and healthy relationship between involved parties. (Focus group #2; member #FG5)

There was a common consensus across participants that most children that attend the ECDs live in extreme poverty and engaging in this initiative was the first step towards improving and uplifting the community overall.

Teachers help take care of our children, we know that our children are safe, secured and members of the community are allowed to bring their children in cases of emergency, whether registered or not. (Focus group #1; member #FG10)

It is a safe haven where we drop off our children when going to work. Our children are not left behind to play in the streets unattended but instead they are taken care of. They are not losing their future (Focus group #1; member #FG7)

The motivations of self-interest, ownership, and guardianship can also be interpreted through the lens of social capital. Social capital refers to the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. The findings demonstrate how these elements are present in the community's engagement with the ECD centres. The trust and mutual respect between parents, teachers, and community members foster a supportive environment that encourages sustained participation and collective action.

Discussion

This study aimed to identify the factors that motivates local community members to participate in the construction and running of ECD centres in the Bushbuckridge municipality using social movement theory as a guiding theoretical framework. Using two focus group discussions and two one-on-one interviews this important topic was unpacked within the context of community development. The factors motivating community participation were found to be self-interest, a sense of ownership and guardianship. Previous research has also found how similar factors motivate broader community participation efforts (see Light et al., 2013), albeit in differing contexts. For example, Kelly et al. (2017) found that a sense of ownership fostered community participation in various community water system projects in Ghana, Kenya, and Zambia. From a social movement theory perspective, the results show how the four main approaches of the theory can be used to understand what motivates community participation in this particular context. In terms of *resource mobilisation*, we visually observed how Team Frank actively engages with the local community in building the ECDs. They do this by going into these communities, engaging with them and identifying the need in the community, and then establishing partnerships with the local community. This, we found, fosters ownership within community members in that they feel as if they are actively contributing towards achieving a common goal (i.e. running an ECD), and addressing local challenges (i.e. the lack of adequate schooling facilities for children in their community). **The findings underscore the importance of resource mobilization in enabling community participation. The community gardens in particular serve as both a practical resource and a symbolic representation of collective effort. By contributing to the centres'**

nutritional programmes and generating income, the gardens provide tangible benefits that motivate participation. This aligns with resource mobilization theory, which posits that social movements require the aggregation and efficient use of resources (e.g. time, money, skills) to succeed. The study highlights how the community leverages local resources, such as gardens and volunteer efforts, to support the ECD centres, thus sustaining the movement. The study also reveals that a strong collective identity has been formed among the community members involved with the ECD centres. The sense of ownership and guardianship highlighted by participants suggests that they view their participation not just as individual actions, but as contributions to a larger collective goal. This aligns with social movement theory, where collective identity serves as a crucial driver for sustained engagement and action. The community's pride in the ECD centres and their role in maintaining and protecting them illustrate the development of a shared identity that reinforces collective agency and solidarity.

Political opportunity structures can greatly impact the success and effectiveness of community participation efforts. If the political environment within a community is fraught and fragile, then this can greatly hinder community participation in influencing decision-making processes and policy outcomes. If the political conditions are favourable, then community participation is much more likely. We observed how Team Frank actively manages these challenges by forging relationships with local tribal leaders (the Mnisi tribe in this instance) within the Bushbuckridge community as well as with local politicians. In one focus group conversation held in the community, a prominent local politician was present. We observed that there is not only political will to support the development of these ECDs within the community but there are opportunities for community members themselves to engage within these political opportunity structures through various community forums and/or participatory planning processes that are arranged by Team Frank. We found this reciprocity in engagement to be crucial for participation efforts in the community. **The political process model emphasizes the role of political opportunities, organizational strength, and cognitive liberation in the success of social movements. While the study does not explicitly address political opportunities, the organizational strength of Team Frank and the community's involvement in decision-making processes suggest a robust infrastructure that supports collective action. The sense of ownership and the inclusion of community members in governance (e.g. proposing and maintaining gardens) indicate a level of cognitive liberation where individuals recognize their agency in effecting change within their community.**

In terms of *framing*, we observed how Team Frank initially engages with the community and highlights a pressing issue and/or challenge at hand, namely the lack of adequate schooling facilities for children. Through this issue identification and definition, the NGO attempts to shape public opinion and mobilize support for building the ECD. Strategically framing the problem was found to build understanding, generate support, and mobilize action for community participation initiatives in Bushbuckridge. Tangentially, the theme of guardianship emerges here as the community are given an opportunity to provide essential support and protection for individuals who may be vulnerable or face barriers to engagement through their participation. This also ensures the well-being of individuals,

particularly the children by safeguarding their rights and interests. This guardianship could enhance the quality of life of the children and also contribute to the overall vibrancy and diversity of the community. Importantly, the framing of guardianship also reinforces the notion of moral responsibility, where participation in the initiative is not only about infrastructural development but also about nurturing and protecting the community's future generations. This highlights the powerful role of framing in shaping not only perceptions but also behaviours and engagement in social development projects. Finally, by presenting the construction of ECD centres as a community-driven initiative rather than a top-down intervention, Team Frank frames local participation as both a duty and an opportunity for empowerment. This aligns with the concept of collective framing, where a shared understanding of a problem and its solutions fosters collective action (Snow & Benford, 1988). Last, the *collective identity* of the community through their shared self-interest and ownership was found to increase future, and future, participation. Moreover, the pride, self-respect, unity, sense of belonging, and social responsibility – all central concepts driving collective identity – was evident for the vast majority of individuals participating in the community. **The study reveals that a strong collective identity has been formed among the community members involved with the ECD centres. The sense of ownership and guardianship highlighted by participants suggests that they view their participation not just as individual actions, but as contributions to a larger collective goal. This aligns with social movement theory, where collective identity serves as a crucial driver for sustained engagement and action. The community's pride in the ECD centres and their role in maintaining and protecting them illustrate the development of a shared identity that reinforces collective agency and solidarity.**

In summary, social movement theory was able to provide an understanding of how these four main approaches influenced the community to become collectively engaged in running these facilities. By forming a collective identity around the importance of early childhood education, communities were found to unite to pursue shared goals, such as improving ECD services or advocating for better policies. Resource mobilization within this framework enabled communities to organize and allocate resources effectively, supporting ECD initiatives. Political opportunity structures helped communities advance their causes, while framing processes ensured that the importance of ECDs was communicated in ways that resonate with broader community values. Together, these elements of social movement theory provided a structured approach to understanding and enhancing community participation, potentially leading to more sustainable and impactful support for the ECDs.

Practical implications

The results of this research are important because they highlight the factors that motivate community participation in a rural setting. Rural communities often face distinct challenges such as limited access to resources, and educational opportunities, making their active participation in decision-making and development crucial. These findings can inform policymakers, local authorities, and organizations about the specific needs and

preferences of rural populations, enabling them to tailor policies, allocate resources, and design interventions more effectively. Moreover, understanding the factors influencing community participation can empower rural residents, promote social inclusion, and foster sustainable development, ultimately enhancing the well-being and resilience of rural communities. We believe that this research can serve as a critical tool for addressing the unique dynamics and aspirations of rural areas, facilitating their growth, and ensuring that their voices are heard in the broader context of governance and development.

The study has a number of important practical implications that we have identified during our engagement with the community that help translate abstract theoretical concepts into actionable steps, making it easier to understand how to use the results of this research. First, in order to encourage active participation in resource-poor contexts, an intervention should initially mobilize all available financial, human, material, and intellectual resources in the community, however limited or restricted they may be. This mobilization is imperative as it builds community capacity which is so often lacking in these communities. It is however, important to note that the mobilization of resources may need to change based on the evolving needs and aspirations of the community. Second, community buy-in is essential. By obtaining this buy-in the community become ‘co-creators’ in collaborative knowledge generation and problem-solving in their community. Unlike traditional top-down approaches, co-creation emphasizes equal partnerships, where the knowledge, experiences, and ideas of community members are valued and integrated into decision-making processes. This approach empowers communities by ensuring their voices are heard and that they have a direct role in shaping outcomes that meet their needs and aspirations. Importantly, the idea of co-creation in community participation efforts is not new nor novel idea with a range of studies finding that establishing trust and buy-in is vital in community interventions (see Han et al., 2021; Osore et al., 2022). The point of difference in our study, however, is that rural regions in South Africa often mistrust of urban ‘outsiders’ (du Toit, 2017), leading to delays and difficulties in obtaining participation. By getting community buy-in, development practitioners inherently answer the so-called ‘what’s in it for me?’ moniker commonly espoused by communities. Third, framing the challenges, and subsequent intervention, as well as establishing a sense of collective identity of the community before, during, and after an intervention can incentivize and increase community participation. If the community are aware of, and understand, the challenges facing their community (framing), as well as their role in addressing these challenges (collective identity), this enables their participation in community interventions. Community participation is a dynamic and ongoing process which can vary depending on a range of other factors not highlighted in this particular study. Social service professionals, and other development practitioners, should be cognizant of the volatility that is often present in rural communities in South Africa and that can impact community participation but these should not detract from the overall aim of interventions, which should bring about upliftment in targeted communities.

Finally, it is imperative that there is long-term and sustained community participation in the running of the ECDs as this will, ultimately, ensure their success. **Long-term community engagement in projects can be fostered by ensuring active participation, capacity building, and local ownership. Involving community members in decision-making and governance helps create a sense of responsibility and investment.**

Providing training and skill development will equip the community to sustain the ECDs beyond their initial implementation. Additionally, integrating economic incentives, such as job opportunities or local business involvement, encourages ongoing commitment. This long-term engagement could be achieved by, among others, establishing strong mentorship programmes within the community which would hopefully engender a supportive community environment. That is, members of the community could be mentored into taking a more proactive and engaged role in the running of the ECDs. Moreover, the contributions of community members already participating in the running of the ECDs could be acknowledged through awards, certificates, and/or public recognition events – which could potentially motivate continued participation. Last, the long-term engagement of members of the community with the ECDs could be sustained by raising awareness of how the ECDs positively impacts the broader community as well as the community members' own career in terms of future employment opportunities.

There are some limitations to the study that should be acknowledged. First, the study uses a relatively low number of participants. We were, however, restricted in our ability to increase the sample size by time, cost, and the availability of individuals willing to participate. Second, social movement theory, while insightful in many contexts, has limitations when applied to the explanation of community participation. It primarily assumes collective action and often focuses on contentious activities like protests, overlooking the vast spectrum of individual and informal community participation. The theory may, therefore, not adequately address structural barriers, such as socioeconomic disparities, which significantly influence participation rates. Additionally, it tends to spotlight more visible and dominant groups, often neglecting the experiences and challenges faced by marginalized communities. Furthermore, social movement theory doesn't always account for the temporal and contextual factors that shape community participation, potentially oversimplifying the complex dynamics within communities. Hence, while it provides a valuable framework for understanding certain aspects of collective action, it may not fully encompass the nuances and diversity inherent in community participation. Finally, the results of this study are context-specific and are applicable to this rural community only.

Conclusion

This study aimed to identify the factors that motivates local community members to participate in the construction and running of ECDs in the Bushbuckridge municipality in the Province of Mpumalanga. The overall findings from the study revealed that community participation is a complex process that is largely driven by personal circumstances. That is, self-interest, a sense of ownership and guardianship were found to be the main drivers of community participation in this unique context. These challenges were found to affect effective local participation along with development of ECD centres. Despite the different perceptions, participation in the area is very high and local community members are usually willing to participate however, they are more willing in areas where they possess skills and considerable knowledge such as gardening. This study is important because we have been able to show what drives individuals to engage in community activities which allows for more targeted and effective initiatives. By

identifying and nurturing these motivators, we can potentially bolster social cohesion, strengthen community bonds, and promote a sense of ownership over future local projects and solutions. Moreover, studying motivators can help policymakers and organizations tailor future outreach and support strategies, thereby enhancing the sustainability and impact of future community-driven initiatives in rural areas. Finally, practical recommendations and strategies to improve and/or increase participation in the area include the provision of educational workshops and programmes for local community members that are aimed at improving the lives of the individuals in the municipality. These workshops will also greatly assist the community in understanding and valuing education not only for the current generations but for future generations as well.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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