Effectiveness of Traditional Leaders in Engaging Communities on Development Matters in Vhembe District of South Africa

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ABSTRACT The present research study brings out the findings of a case study on the perceptions of elected and traditional leaders with respect to how effective they engage communities on development issues. Fourteen villages in nine Traditional Leadership Councils within Makhado, Mutale and Thulamela local Municipalities of Vhembe District were selected using the stratified random sampling technique to participate in the study. Fourteen Councillors whose Wards covered the villages were interviewed together with members of Headmen Councils. One hundred and twelve focus group discussions and 14 key informant interviews were conducted. A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data, with a tape recorder serving as an assistive device. Interview transcripts and field notes were analysed using the inductive approach. Traditional leaders were reported to be effective in engaging communities, resulting in people-centred decisions being made; they planned and held regular, well-attended meetings that involved residents of the areas under their jurisdiction. The meetings took place on days and at times most convenient to the local community; and they presided over discussions that dealt with matters of real concern to grassroots communities. The unearthed mechanisms for effective community engagement might help to reduce the increasingly common service delivery protests. Besides, the study clarifies how to achieve ownership of community development initiatives. Lastly, ideas on the appropriate mechanisms for effective community engagement are evident.

INTRODUCTION

In South Africa and other parts of the world, local government is the first point of contact between an individual and a governmental institution (Thornhill 2008). This implies that it is the sphere of government that is closest to the people (Planact 2001; Beall 2004; Letsholo 2006). Thus, it should be most capable to negotiate development (Paradza et al. 2010). This is the basis of developmental local government, which is articulated in Chapter 7 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996. In chapter 7 of the Constitution, Section 152 spells out the objects of local government as: to provide democratic and accountable government for local communities; ensure the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner; promote social and economic development; promote a safe and healthy environment; and encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in the matters of local government.

Section 153 of the Constitution, informs that each Municipality has the following developmental duties: structure and manage its administration, and budgeting and planning processes to give priority to the basic needs of the community, and promote the social and economic development of the community; and participate in national and provincial development programs. The developmental local government is designed to enhance positive impact on the daily lives of South Africans through improving the standard of living and quality of life of the people. In this country, Municipalities anchor local government and are mandated to deliver basic services. This is at the heart of developmental local government Elected Councillors and Ward Committees have the mandate to lead local government, in particular at grassroots level.

Although, not much is stipulated in the Constitution about how traditional leaders should participate in the realization of developmental local government ideals and goals, the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act of 2003 fills this gap. Specifically, section 5(1) compels both national and provincial governments to promote partnership between Municipalities and Traditional Councils. Section 20 (1) gives Traditional authorities the powers to promote socio-economic development, amongst others. By implication, traditional leaders might

be regarded as a fourth sphere at local government level. Although, this might be the case, it is crucial to point out that prior to the attainment of democracy in 1994 traditional leaders played the roles that are now entrusted to elected institutions such as the Ward Committee (Ntsebeza 2002; Letsholo 2006; Khunou 2011; Kwame 2012). The changes in roles, coupled with poor communication between elected and traditional leaders as well as with the communities they lead (Keulder 1998; Ntsebeza 2004), precipitate considerable confusion among these stakeholders. Consequently, community members are often left in limbo particularly with respect to who to regard as their leaders. This hampers service delivery and community development in general, most notably in rural areas.

The Municipal Systems Act of 2000 entrusts elected leaders (especially Ward Councillors and Committee members) with the responsibility of meeting community members quarterly to give updates on progress with implementation of development programs and projects. The meetings are also meant to secure community feedback and other views to ensure that there is accountability in the way development work is championed. In addition, it is mandatory for elected leaders to ensure that communities participate in budget formulation, integrated development planning, performance management, strategic decision making relating to provision of municipal services and passing by-laws. Section 17 (2) of the Municipal Systems Act of 2000 also notes that when Municipalities establish mechanisms, processes and procedures to enable the local community to participate in their affairs they must take into account the special needs of people who cannot read or write, those with disabilities, women, and other disadvantaged groups. This is to ensure inclusive community participation in decision making.

Venson (1997) argued that areas of conflict between traditional leaders and elected leaders concern many issues. Some of the issues relate to which institution has the following rights: convening community meetings, consulting the people at grassroots level regarding development matters, managing development funds, and ensuring that the desired development takes place. This situation made it imperative to carry out research seeking to build a better understanding of how effective traditional and elect-

ed leaders in Vhembe District of South Africa engaged grassroots communities with respect to rural development matters. Of particular interest was to describe the level of dialogue. This took into account number, venue, focus, and timing of meetings held; communication channels and adopted strategies. In order to achieve this objective, the following research questions anchored the investigation:

i.   How do traditional and elected leaders engage their communities?
ii. Are the community engagement strategies and approaches used effective?
iii. Are the traditional and elected leaders' community engagement approaches equally effective?
iv. How can the community engagement strategies and approaches be strengthened?

The present study was carried out in Vhembe District. Makhado, Musina, Mutale and Thulamela Municipalities constitute the District. The District Municipality is classified as category C and was established in terms of the Local Government Structures Act, Number 117 of 1998. Approximately, 20 % of Limpopo Province's 5 404 868 people reside in Vhembe District. Its Global Positioning System (GPS) co-ordinates are 22.9333°S and 30.4667°E.

Vhembe is the northernmost District of the country (Republic of South Africa). It shares its northern border with Beitbridge District in Matabeleland South Province of Zimbabwe. Vhembe consists of all territories that were part of the former Venda Bantustan. However, Districts of northern and Western former Gazankulu Bantustan were also incorporated into it. Hence, Tshivenda and Xitsonga speaking people are the main local inhabitants. The main administrative office of Vhembe District Municipality is located in Thohoyandou town, the former Capital city of the former Venda Bantustan. The most commonly spoken languages are Afrikaans, English, Sepedi, Tshivenda and Xitsonga.

The District covers 21 407 km^2 of land with a total population estimated at 1 294 722. Out of these people, 81 % live in areas under the control of Traditional leaders (Statistics South Africa, 2012). Besides, Stats SA (2012) indicated that Vhembe District has the second largest number (81 %) of people living in tribal areas within the province.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present exploratory study was conducted within the qualitative research paradigm. This research technique deal with an abstraction of reality from an outsiders' perspective, hence, it was important for the researcher to keep to a detached, objective view of the facts such that the research process is hypothetically free from bias. The design was appropriate for this study because the researcher sought to get an in-depth understanding of how effectively elected and traditional leaders engage communities on development issues.

Population and Sampling Procedure

Members of Traditional Councils, Headmen Councils and elected leaders in Vhembe District's Makhado, Musina and Thulamela Municipalities were the sub-population groups. They were identified as ideal participants because of the belief that they would provide comprehensive and relevant information sought in the study.

Nine Traditional Councils (TCs) were purposively sampled. This took into account the fact that the TCs were drawn from the predominantly Venda and Tsonga communities. The stratified random sampling technique was used to select 14 villages under the leadership of Headmen Makhado, Mutale and Thulamela local Municipalities. In addition, 14 Councillor's leading Wards within which the sampled villages were located served as respondents.

Data Collection Methods and Techniques

Data were collected using focus group discussions and key informant interviews that the principal researcher facilitated. The collection of data without Research Assistants was beneficial because quite often most people in rural areas prefer to use idioms to express their views. This might have been interpreted differently if the Research Assistants had been used. Apart from this, time was saved because the need for constant debriefing sessions with the principal investigator was nullified. In addition, it would have been time consuming to induct the Research Assistants and also more expensive to have them participating in the data collection. A uniform set of semi-structured interview questions was used to guide the focus group discussions and key informant interviews.

The total number of focus groups was 112. Fourteen key informant interviews were also conducted. Five focus groups discussion was held per day. This was done in order to guarantee administrative efficiency because the venues for discussion were sparsely distributed.

Each focus group identified two members. One served as the chair while the other member provided secretarial services during the course of the discussions. On average, each focus group discussion took about 1 hour to complete.

Apart from note-taking during the interviews and focus group discussions, a tape recorder was used after the respondents had consented in writing to its use. After each day of data collection, the Principal Investigator listened to the interview tapes and transcribed the content. This helped to sharpen and enrich the notes taken during the discussions and/or interviews. Each focus group discussion commenced with the researcher asking the respondents to express their views on how effectively elected and traditional leaders engaged communities on development matters. Probing questions were asked to clarify issues that were raised. Each group compiled its views on a notebook and then presented the findings in a plenary session.

The focus group discussions were facilitated in such a way that only one person spoke at a time. To ensure that those people who tended to dominate in the discussion gave space to others to contribute they were requested to speak only when the facilitator gave them a platform to talk. The quiet members in each group were encouraged to contribute their views.

Data Analysis

Thematic Content Analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse the qualitative data. The participants' perceptions were organized into common themes, ensuring that the sources (adults, men and women, youth and elected leaders) were not lost because they provided cursors towards responding to research questions. Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview transcripts and field notes. Similarities and differences across sub-groups (adults, youth, male, female, traditional leaders, and elected leaders) were also explored. This involved listening to the tape

records, transcribing and translating the interviews, which were conducted in Xitsonga and Tshivenda into English. In addition, summaries and matrices were composed. The results were placed in categories such as views on resilience of the institution of traditional leadership as expressed by Traditional and Headman Council members taking into account the following categories: age group, sex and elected leaders. Statements were coded. Themes were linked and informative quotes selected prior to writing up the information in a coherent fashion

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Involving grassroots community members and their leaders in policy planning, decision-making, service delivery and assessment is crucial for effective, transparent and accountable governance. Masango (2002: 52) supports this view, arguing that "public participation lies at the heart of democracy." Lack of engagement may lead to the disconnection of the leaders with the communities they serve, which curtails the provision of sustainable service delivery.

In this study, elected leaders in Vhembe District blamed traditional leaders who they believed were discrediting them. The former said claimed that traditional leaders were undermining them when they referred to them as inexperienced and not serving the interests of the people. It was pointed out that elected leaders often opted to advance political agendas instead. The elected leaders were of the view that they were effective and championed inclusive community development.

What Makes Traditional Leaders Effective in Engaging Communities?

It was revealed that traditional leaders were effective in engaging communities when making decisions on development matters and other issues of interest to them within the areas that fell under their jurisdiction. Even elected leaders concurred. The findings that traditional leaders were effective in community engagement confirmed Sharma's (nd) argument that when making rules and regulations Chiefs resort to a curious system of consultation with close aids and the people at large. The prominence of this view in the current study is aptly captured in the following excerpt from a Headman's Council member from Thulamela Municipality:

Loko lembe ri sungula hi tshama ehansi ni va-akatiko hinkwavo laha evuhosini, hikuva unwana na unwana u amukeriwile. Hi endla nongonoko wa minhlengeletano ya lembe hi nkwaro leswaku unwana na unwana a tshama a ri karhi a swi tiva leswaku nhlengelatano wu ta va rini. Mihlengeletano leyi yi endliwa hi Sonto ni mpundzu. Leri I siku na nkarhi lowu va-akatiko va nga twanana ku hlangana. Loko ko humelela swinwanyana swa xihatla swi lavaku va-akatiko, tinduna ti tshama ti ri kona emugangeni ku vitana nhlengeletano. A hi fani ni lavaya va xidimokrasi, hikuva loko va lava kuhlangana na vanhu hiloko ku ri na xokarhi. Minhlengeletano ya xidimokirasi yi endliwa ixikolweni ha kanyingi; kumbe a tivaleni ta mintlangu. Kotala ku rhambiwa lava va lavekaku ntsena. Loko vanhu vo vitaniwa hi lava vaxidimokirasi ku hlangana evuhosini hiloko va lava leswaku Hosi yi seketela makungu ya vona na ku lava ku kombisa va-akatiko leswaku va tirhisana na Hosi. [At the beginning of the year we sit down with the community members at the Headman's kraal because that is the platform where everyone feels welcome. We draft a yearly meeting plan so that everyone is always aware. The meetings take place on Sunday mornings. This is the day and time that the community members have always agreed to meet. If something that requires urgent attention happens and requires the community to meet and resolve, the Headmen are always available to convene such gatherings. We are not the same as the democratically elected leaders who only meet with people most often in an ad hoc manner. Most of the times meetings called by democratically elected leaders take place at school premises or at sports grounds. Only those people, who are wanted, are invited to participate. Rarely do such meetings take place at the Headmen's kraal, except in cases when they want buy-in from the traditional leaders and also to prove to the community that we have a good working relationship].

Elected leaders indicated that despite the requirement in the law, for instance, the Municipal Systems Act of 2000, for them to meet with the communities on a quarterly basis, this rarely happened. The meetings were not taking place because of poor attendance. Community members' preparedness to attend public meetings convened by elected leaders largely depended on the issues on the agenda. Furthermore, elect-

ed leaders called the meetings on an unplanned or ad hoc basis, awkward dates and also at times that community members often found unsuitable. This revelation by elected leaders confirmed the traditional leader's assertion revealed above. Traditional leaders are spot on in terms of planning their meetings in advance because this guarantee maximum participation of community members the implication for development work is that constant community engagement can help reduce the increasingly common service delivery protests.

Factors Contributing to the Inefficiency of Elected Leaders

The key research findings of this study are that traditional leaders are effective in engaging communities resulting in people-centred decisions being made. Besides, they planned and held regular, well-attended meetings involving residents of areas under their jurisdiction. The meetings took place on days and at times most convenient to the local population. Often, they presided over discussions that dealt with specific matters of concern to grassroots communities.

Buccus (2011) viewed that, despite their promise of community participation in development processes and municipal decision-making, elected leaders often function poorly. Nyalunga (2006) supports this view and says that "Ward Committees are largely perceived as ineffective in advancing citizen participation at the local government level. There are many reasons that explain their inefficiency, among which are lack of capacity and incentives to persuade them to work wholeheartedly towards the betterment of their constituencies". Besides, Buccus et al. (2007) contended that Ward Committees are largely ineffective because they are hamstrung by human and financial resources constraints.

Hicks (2006) and Nyalunga (2006) make reference to the tensions that often exist between Ward Committees and Ward Councillors. This emanates largely from lack of clarity or understanding of the role of Ward Committees and some members undermining the Councillor with a view to taking over from them. Councillors are also regarded as mainly detached from the realities of communities and thus fail to meet the expectations of the electorate. Piper and Deacon (2008: 72) agree with this view, saying "effective Ward Committees which deepen the mu-

nicipal deliberative process require an effective Ward Councillor. Without a Councillor who is competent, well-organised and committed to the Ward Committee, the structure cannot operate. This is mainly due to the fact that the Councillor is responsible for how often the committee meets, what it discusses, what information Ward Committee members require, and what information the Council obtains from Ward Committees".

The fact that there are limited resources available to enable Ward Committees to function better and improve efficiency in the delivery of services seems to be the most widespread challenge in the quest to involve communities in matters that relate to local government (Africa and Nicol 2006; Hicks 2006). This is in contrast with traditional leadership which seems better organised and is clear with regard to its roles. The roles of Stewards, Headmen, Chiefs and Kings are clear. For example, the Steward never plays the role of the Headman except when delegated to do so.

Sivaramakrishnan (2000) commented that, in India the inefficiency of elected leaders emanates from political instability in the municipal Council as well as unnecessary influence of corrupt politicians. This fact resonates with the findings of the current study. Ward Committees were said to be so politically-oriented that they spent most of their time fighting for positions instead of engaging communities on development matters.

The Importance of Inclusive Community Engagement and Need for Establishing Engagement Platforms

The traditional system of engagement entails members of communities meeting at the Steward's residence in a sub-village before proceeding to the Headmen's kraal. Such robust and all inclusive meetings were held to discuss and make recommendations on development issues, amongst other matters. Engagement of communities by Traditional leaders was said to be a steady process based on the principle that, *"Khosi ndi khosi nga vhathu"* (A Chief is there because of the people he/she leads). This principle underlined the centrality of the strong bond that engagement created between traditional leaders and the people under their leadership.

Natalini (2010) revealed that in Ghana the bottom-up planning process which is supposed to begin at the Unit Committee (similar to South

African Ward Committee) level has never really worked principally due to not being paid for the services it renders. Poor remuneration or complete lack of payment of Ward Committees often leads to the failure to attract people who understand municipal operational systems and have the requisite skills to lead (Africa and Nicol 2006). Regular meetings involving the electorate should inform the business of local government. However, rarely do the people participate in the meetings which are supposed to constitute an effective way that guarantees maximum involvement of the electorate in managing its own affairs. This is particularly true and critical given the fact that community development strengths and needs must be identified, locally prioritized first before being recommended for inclusion in the municipal integrated development plans. In this study, it was revealed that most of the community-felt needs were not included in the municipal integrated development plans because of lack of poor attendance of the meetings mainly due to the unpopular way in which elected leaders convened public forums for such engagement.

It was indicated in the present study that in most cases elected leaders preferred to engage their communities in the absence of traditional leaders. The explanation given for this tendency was that elected leaders wanted community members to view them as the institution of choice with respect to championing local development. Meetings that elected leaders convened were also poorly attended because they took place at times and venues that did not suit most community members. In addition, community members shunned meetings and other public platforms that elected leaders presided over because they regarded the latter as weak and untrustworthy. Elected leaders agreed with the view that indeed if the meetings were convened with the active involvement of traditional leaders, high turnouts would be guaranteed. This demonstrated that traditional leaders commanded respect in rural areas and were still effective in engaging communities. This finding resonates well with that of Natalini (2010). The latter author says that in Ghana Chiefs are appointed to serve in local government so that they deal with traditional matters. He argues that this is due to their recognised ability to mobilize people and also their unique role in building and sustaining cohesion in their communities. In support of this view, a

Headman Council member from Thulamela Municipality said:

Vha khanselara a vha na mushumo, musi hu na dzi phambano midini, nndwa, kana dzi nwe phambano muvhunduni, vhathu a vha yi mudini wa mukhanselara, vhaya musanda u toda thuso ngauri vha a zwidivha uri muthu munwe na munwe u a dzhielwa ntha hu sa sedzwi zwauri ndi wa lihoro lifhio na hone muthu o no yo una vhutanzi ha uri mbilahelo dzawe dzi do tandululwa husina u dzhia sia. [Ward Councillors are useless. Each time there are conflicts in the families, fights or any other conflicts in the community, people do not go to the Ward Councillors' houses. Instead, they run to the traditional leaders' houses for help because they know that every person is valued irrespective of their political affiliation and they are sure that their concerns would be addressed fairly].

Concurring with what has already been alluded to above; Smith (2008) argued that Ward Committees are usually viewed as highly partisan structures that are aligned to party political agendas. Taking into account their observations in a study conducted in KwaZulu Natal, Piper and Deacon (2008) pointed out that Ward Committees and branches of political parties have close relationships and in some cases the members of both structures are the same. This compromises the independence of Ward Committees from political influence. Buccus et al. (2007) extend this contention when they revealed that Ward Committee members tend to be drawn from the same party as the Ward Councillor. This is in direct contrast to what the government legislation requires because Ward Committees are meant to be non-partisan structures. The impact of the partisan behaviour of Ward Committees extends beyond just undermining their independent role as it also directly reduces the health of civil society through undermining its ability to engage the local Council (Piper at al. 2008). The party politicization of community participation and Ward Committees, further, hampers the involvement of traditional leaders and non-partisan ordinary citizens (Nyalunga 2006). The lack of involvement of traditional leaders and non-partisan citizens in community development matters is suicidal.

In the current study, it was found that members of Ward Committees, including Councillors are politically aligned. It is not surprising that

community meetings are politicised because of lack of oversight role by members of other political parties. It can be said that for effective community participation in local government it is cardinal that members of Ward Committees should not be biased towards politics without taking into account leadership capabilities.

In the current study, elected leaders were of the view that community members associated them with the political party they represented. Yet, they represented the entire community irrespective of party political affiliation. Piper et al. (2008) supported this view. As a result, community members invariably approached traditional leaders whenever they faced challenges. Presumably, this showed that traditional leaders were trustworthy, responsible and reliable (Logan 2009, 2011). She is of the view that traditional authority can coexist with elected leadership as well as also enjoy considerable support from people in rural areas. Another perspective is that traditional leaders are largely regarded as less corrupt and more trustworthy than other institutions at the local level (Sawyer 2008). Therefore, if sustainable service delivery is to be achieved in rural areas traditional leaders should be treated as a key interest group.

The views expressed above highlight the non-existence of effective platforms where traditional leaders and elected leaders met to discuss service delivery issues in their respective areas and map clear distinctions in their roles. Traditional leaders were preferred because of the fact that they interacted easily with the people they led as opposed to Ward Committees who were viewed merely as an extension of the political parties they belonged to. In support of this in 2013, the Chairperson of the North West House of Traditional Leaders, Dr Madoda Zibi said during the South Africa Local Government Association assembly that "Our province is predominantly rural and our rural communities are run by traditional authorities; for development to take place, we must be taken on board because we know these communities better." This view is significant given that elected leaders cannot achieve much in rural areas on their own. Besides, this shows that traditional leaders have embraced the elected institution as a partner when championing effective community development.

Keulder (1998) contends that one of the reasons for the ineffectiveness of traditional leaders as effective drivers of service provision is that they do not have the resources and sufficient capacity to play this role. He suggested that corruption in the form of nepotism may arise because "in times of scarcity they (traditional leaders) may also be inclined to allocate services to members of their immediate families first" (Keulder 1998: 319). However, he accepts that traditional leaders might effectively work as supervisors of development projects and other local activities. Apparently, this is due to their strategic positioning within the community and the constant level of engagement they have with the people they lead.

Frequency of the Meetings and Procedural Issues

In the present study, elected leaders acknowledged that traditional authorities effectively engaged community members when dealing with development issues. Meetings were held regularly at the Headman's kraal or homestead. These findings confirm the observations of Cook (2005) who reported that the Bafokeng people are actively involved in their governance structures through participating in meetings at village and broader community levels. The communities lobby their Headmen and the *Kgosi* (chief in the Tswana language) to solve community challenges and initiate the needed programmes and services. In addition, Dusig (2002) reported that Namibian development program officers regularly rely on traditional leaders for community participation, in particular during the initial phases of the project when the general acceptance of external ideas or individuals is needed.

In this study also, it was observed that the meetings that traditional leaders convened were conducted using the vernacular languages, especially Xitsonga and Tshivenda. Apart from this, community members received first-hand information through traditional communication avenues such as Stewards. Personal invitations to attend meetings were always sent in time. A common means of inviting residents to meetings was through *u lidzwa ha tsimbi musanda nga ndila ine vha dzulapo vha di vha tshivhidzwelwa vha kha di vha mahayani a vho* (ringing of the bell at the Headman's kraal in such a way that community members know in advance when they are still at home the purpose of the meeting).

In contrast, elected leaders invited community members through notices posted at bus stops and shops. It was also observed that inviting members through sending out notices was not effective as some people never received the messages. The continuous changes in meeting venues such as schools and sports fields presented immense challenges. This was cited as evidence of how Ward Councillors undermined the authority and value of traditional leaders. In general, it seemed evident that community members preferred meetings that were held at the Headman's kraal. In many instances, English was commonly used during the meetings that the Ward Committees convened. This made it difficult for illiterate people to understand and contribute to on-going deliberations. Chinsinga (2006) makes similar observations in his studies in Malawi. He pointed out that worth highlighting was the Councillors' using of English in meetings as a way of side-lining the predominantly illiterate traditional leaders during development-oriented debates. Such exclusion is disempowering because decisions are made without them significantly contributing. The exclusion of illiterates from discussions is not in line with the principles of democracy. The consequence of this is that the debates do not benefit from experience and indigenous knowledge which is crucial in decision making.

Letsholo (2006) reports that miscommunication between elected and traditional leaders often create severe problems for local communities, chief amongst them being service delivery. It was found in the study that establishing scheduled bilateral meetings between elected and traditional leaders could strengthen existing community engagement strategies and approaches. This was based on the fact that they would collaborate and enhance the trust that community members had in them. Having this, it is crucial to examine how each leadership institution engages community members in discussing development matters.

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996, without directly using the concept social cohesion, entrenches the principles of non-racialism and non- discrimination, and confirms a quest for reconciliation and nation building. The preamble revealed "that South Africa belongs to all who live in it" and that the Constitution aims to "improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each per-

son." Section 1 confirms the values of non-racialism and non-sexism". Further, Section 9 (1) reads "Everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law." In Section 9 (3) it is stated that "The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race." The Constitution further deepens this in Section 10 where it is stated that "Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected." The non–discriminatory strategy of traditional leaders relating to inviting community members to participate in meetings abhors exclusion on the basis of sex, race, academic qualification, financial position, political affiliation and religious beliefs, amongst others. This is one of the key ingredients of successful involvement of communities on development issues and central in nurturing sustainability of efforts designed to promote improved quality of lives of residents of rural areas. This study found that elected leaders are not successfully involving communities on development matters mostly those that are illiterate and politically inactive.

Basing his arguments on lived experiences during the proceedings at the Thembu Great Place at *Mqhekezweni* in the Eastern Cape Province Mandela (1995) shares his views on the role of the democratic leader. He described the proceedings as follows, "It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard. Chief and subject; warrior and medicine man, shopkeepers and farmers, land owners and labourers. People spoke without anyone interrupting them and the meeting lasted for many hours." This contrasted sharply with the democratic institutions' facilitation of decision making in that many hours of discussions do not often result in the finalization of the matter. Decisions that elected leaders preside over are made based on votes irrespective of whether the verdict/resolution is good or bad. Rarely is there thorough dissection of issues since the ultimate goal is to make a decision even though it might not be a well-informed or supported one.

Also observed in the present study was that meetings that elected leaders organised were not sufficiently advertised or accessible. The meetings were also held at inconvenient times such as in the evening during the week. Consequent-

ly, rarely did community members become aware of the invitations. Thus, it was not surprising that such meetings were poorly attended. This finding confirms the observations of Buccus (2011) who argued that in meetings that elected leaders hold only a privileged few have access to these 'invited spaces', which are not sufficiently advertised or made accessible, particularly to the marginalised groups. Besides, Hicks (2006) is of the view that attempted to facilitate community input are largely superficial and do not tap into the real power base where decisions are made. In rural-based Municipalities there are often complaints of poorly advertised meetings held at inconvenient times (Buccus 2011).

Table 1 provides a description of how traditional and elected leaders engaged communities on development matters. With respect to invitations, elected leaders commonly used modern methods such as posting notices at bus stops, trees and shops which community members in rural areas were not familiar with and at times mostly associated with electioneering. In contrast, traditional leaders still relied on inviting community members through the directly spo-

ken word and letters. Consequently, their meetings were usually well attended. Buccus (2011) made a similar observation in his study in Kwa-Zulu-Natal. He reports that in some Municipalities, integrated development planning participatory processes are mainly in the form of Ward-based meetings. The meetings are advertised using loud hailers, among other 'marketing' initiatives. Suggestion boxes placed in libraries are also used, which results in feedback being received mostly from middle class communities who seem to value and respond better through such a facility. One of the key success factors relating to high attendance of the meetings is the use of a commonly known and agreed to venue. This is in stark contrast to elected leaders' practice of constantly changing venues, often resulting in confusion among potential attendees.

Another success factor regarding community members' attendance of meetings was that they contributed items for discussion. Quite often, people invariably want to listen to what they believe might result in benefits accruing to them. Calling a meeting without specifying agenda

Table 1: Ways that elected and traditional leaders used to engage grassroots communities in Vhembe District

Item	Elected leaders	Traditional leaders
Invitation	a. Loudspeakers mounted on moving vehicles b. Newspaper advert c. Pamphlets d. Posting notices at Bus stops, trees and shops e. Social media such as twitter, facebook, and whatsapp.	a. Door to door word of mouth by the Sub-Headmen (Steward) b. Ringing the bell (*U lidza tsimbi*) at the Chief, Headmen, or Sub-Headmen Kraal
Meeting Venue	a. Headmen kraal (only when buy-in is required from old people and Traditional leaders) b. School halls c. Sports grounds	Chief, Headmen, Sub-Headmen kraal (This venue is consistently known to the community)
Agenda Items	a. Community development projects b. Dates of visit by political leaders c. Electioneering	a. Any other business b. Community development issues c. Safety and security
Participation	a. Community members if the agenda is about Job creation b. Members of their political party c. Political active, educated and rich people participate and dominate in the discussion d. Traditional leaders if their buy-in is required or to pull crowd for electioneering	All community members even the mentally disabled people are afforded and opportunity to raise their views on any matter of their interest
Decision Making Process	a. Influential people's opinions are taken without being challenged b. Voting	Thorough discussions and everybody is afforded an opportunity to raise their views on all matters under discussion

items of interest to the community is unlikely to stimulate members' interest and desire to participate. Also observed in the present study was that community members prefer meetings where an open agenda is used since they freely raise or add any other issues of importance to them. The major downside of this approach is that the meetings might be used to advance personal agendas.

Dahl (2006: 6) argued that democratic decision making in a community means that "all members should be treated as if they were equally qualified to participate in the process of making decisions about the policies of the community." He unpacks the concept of political equality in terms of five normative criteria. These are effective participation; members have equal and effective opportunities for getting their views known; equality in voting; gaining enlightened understanding; control of the agenda; and inclusion of adults. In the present study, it was found that in the meetings that traditional leaders convened, everyone was free to participate irrespective of level of education and wealth or influence in the community as opposed to the meetings the elected leaders presided over. Politically active, educated and rich people dominate the discussions in the meetings that elected leaders organise. This makes them more influential in decision making to the detriment of genuine, all-inclusive civic participation. It is clear from this study that it is imperative for elected and traditional leaders to demonstrate good leadership and invariably work closely to facilitate community-determined decision making.

In his autobiography entitled *My Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela (1994) fondly recalled the way in which the Chiefs in his District in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa made decisions after much discussion and negotiation, including how collective sentiments are incorporated. He singles out the centrality of African democracy that takes into account traditional leadership structures and rebuilds shuttered cultural pride by restoring some "*Ubuntu*". This means that some people make one a respectable human being and thus an individual cannot achieve anything through adopting a lone ranger approach. In the current study in Vhembe District, these arguments were confirmed because decisions taken at meetings that traditional leaders organized were said to be made after thorough discussions. Deliberate ef-

forts were made to ensure that all ideas were listened to, irrespective of the contributor's political affiliation, level of education or sexual orientation, among other potential discriminatory practices.

In discussing the role of the regent, Mandela (1994) highlighted how the latter simply listens to comments, no matter how critical they might be of his own actions. The meetings would go on until some form of consensus emerged from the deliberations. He revealed that meetings ended with or without a decision being made. Mandela aptly articulates his observations in the following way:

Democracy meant that all men were to be heard, and a decision was taken together as a people. Majority rule was a foreign notion. A minority was not to be crushed by a majority. Only at the end of the meeting as the sun was setting would the regent speak. His purpose was to sum up what had been said and formed some consensus among the diverse opinions. No conclusion was forced on people who disagreed. If no agreement could be reached, another meeting would be held.

This extract demonstrates how community meetings that traditional leaders preside over are normally managed. Decisions are made based on facts (deliberated issues) and not just general consensus as is the case with the meetings that democratically elected leaders convene. It can be said that traditional leaders are effective in engaging communities.

Mohapeloa (1945) added his voice to the debate on decision making involving traditional leaders. He argues that Chiefs are not autocratic. Evidence of this argument comes in the form of existing African political organizations or bodies such as the *Khoro* and the Chief's consultation with the people residing in areas under their jurisdiction when dealing with matters of community interest. Lodge (1995) echoes this view through pointing out that the Chief often consults and discusses community matters with his Councillors. Whenever the Chief wants to make announcements or to discuss the issues of state, he calls public meetings which married men in particular attend. Although this is appreciable, it is not inclusive enough and highlights the highly patriarchal nature of the African societies. It is not surprising that Sharma (nd: 14) observes that in Botswana, "The women, youth, disabled, immigrants and some lower status

groups have traditionally felt inhibited in speaking their mind openly at *Kgotla*". It was observed in the current study in Vhembe District that this was not the case. Men, women, youth and people with disabilities (for example psychiatric patients) were all accommodated and afforded an opportunity to participate in the discussions during public meetings that traditional leaders convened. An example of this was a meeting that the Principal Researcher attended where the community deliberated on who qualified for a free house meant for the most vulnerable or disadvantaged. A mentally disabled man was afforded an opportunity to express his views on the criteria that had to be considered. This signified real democracy at work because even Section 17 of the Municipal Systems Act of 2000 emphasises the need for a Municipality to establish appropriate mechanisms, processes and procedures to enable the local community to participate in local affairs taking into account the special needs of people. Among the groups of people who should deserve special recognition are those who cannot read or write people with disabilities, women and other disadvantaged groups.

This statutory provision explained in the preceding paragraph is consistent with the following views of Haider (2009), who said "participatory processes should be inclusive and should incorporate groups that are often on the margin (for example, the poor, women, youth, minorities, the aged, the disabled, the landless, and displaced persons)." Paulo Freire (1983) adds weight to these views, arguing that the participation process is the right of all people to individually and collectively speak their word. He reflects on this as follows, "This is not the privilege of some few men (and women), but the right of every (wo) man. Consequently, no one can say a true word alone – nor can he (or she) say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words" (Paulo Freire 1983: 76). Also, Rifkin (1990) projected the social justice argument that all people, especially the poor and disadvantaged, have both the right and duty to be involved in decisions that affect their daily lives. Therefore, community members, including marginalised groups, should be involved in community-level discussions and decision-making and should have access to information on the specific programme or project, on decisions and selected priorities, and on the use of funds (Rifkin 1990). This contributes to fairness, transparency and accountability, all of which are the main pillars of democracy.

Some academics, most notably Robert Chambers (1983) argued that "putting the last first" was the only way to achieve rural development. For Chambers, participation has thus developed from a research technique into a means of empowerment. Mayo and Craig (1995) viewed that, participation increases the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of development programmes. Robert Chambers (1997) expanded this argument and points out that participation empowers citizens so that they can continuously give direction in public policies or programs. He argued that the location of participatory work is thus focused on grassroots communities and depends on local interests as well as capacity to engage in action for change for the success of public policy or programmes. Taking into account the results of this study, it is important to develop or amend the policy that regulates community engagement or consultation to ensure maximum participation of communities on development matters.

CONCLUSION

In this study, traditional leaders were said to be effective in engaging members of their communities in decision making processes. They planned and held regular meetings at the Headman's kraal where residents of areas under their jurisdiction participated. The meetings took place on days and at times that most of the community members were free and thus available to participate. Discussions focused on specific matters that the community members wanted resolved. Attendees contributed items for discussion in each meeting. However, what was not clear was how effectively the resolutions made at the meetings were implemented. Nevertheless, the evidence from literature and the results of this study in Vhembe District suggest that the ideal approach to dealing with issues affecting communities in rural areas lies in investing in efforts that strengthen existing systems instead of creating new ways of doing things. Apart from this, this study has built a strong case for promoting deeper cohabitation of traditional and elected leadership institutions in a complementary relationship. It is prudent to promote the popular participation process through building

on what traditional leaders are already doing rather than to re-invent the wheel. To achieve this, it is imperative to consider developing a governance model that clarifies the roles and responsibilities of the two leadership institutions.

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