

RESEARCH

Peacebuilding through Public Participation Mechanisms in Local Government: The Case Study of Mbizana Local Municipality, South Africa

Christine Dube¹ Likhona Mnguni² and Alain Tschudin^{1,3}

¹ Good Governance Africa, ZA

² University of KwaZulu-Natal, ZA

³ WITS School of Governance, ZA

Corresponding author: Christine Dube (chrissy@gga.org)

This article asserts the importance of public participation in local government, through social action research, in order to achieve good governance. We examine how bad local governance negatively impacts the socio-economic development trajectory of communities. Based on fieldwork conducted in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, this article illustrates the transformative role participatory processes and good governance played as peacebuilding mechanisms to achieve positive peace in the Mbizana local municipality. The municipality's geography spans from deep rural areas to the urban central business district (CBD). A mixed qual-quant methodology with a phased rollout was applied to engage the local government and communities involved, and target with precision the lived reality of the residents. The findings of the study point to the transformative nature of the local participatory processes that entailed building confidence between the municipal authorities, the NGO Good Governance Africa (GGA) and the Mbizana community, and new ideas on how to facilitate public participation. Our conclusion is that civil society organisations should build trust with local authorities in communities for public participation interventions to be successful. This outlook differs to perceiving local authorities as a threat or barrier to direct interventions. The combination of participatory processes and good governance restored the community's confidence in the municipality through shared governance information and capacity building. This hybrid approach can be replicated and applied to promote sustainable peace in communities that face similar challenges.

Keywords: governance; peacebuilding; positive peace; Mbizana Local Municipality; GGA

Introduction

Urban conflict in Mbizana stemmed from bad governance in the local municipality. This was primarily characterised by poor service delivery, mismanagement and corruption. The conflict arose when communities did not receive the service delivery they expected from the local municipality. In response, residents embarked on service delivery protests, demonstrations, and violence in the Mbizana urban space. In most cases, protests there have been attributed to poor service delivery and residents' high expectations for improved social and economic development (Nwafor, 2016). South Africa holds the unenviable title of 'protest capital' of the world, largely sparked by failed service delivery and mismanagement in local government. This points to a widespread absence of good governance practices.

The Mbizana local municipality also experienced high levels of municipal finance mismanagement as reflected in the adverse audit report it received from South Africa's Auditor-General in 2012/13 (MFMA, 2012–13). This indicated an absence of good governance¹ principles, which include accountability,

¹ However, not restricted to the mentioned. Over the years, scholars have had varied views of what constitutes good government, with some agreement and arguments to the following; absence of corruption, public participation, judicial independence, active and independent media, freedom of information, administrative competence and accountability to public interests on issues of public concern (Plumptre and Graham, 1999; Graham et al., 2003; Gisselquist, 2012; Rotberg, 2014).

transparency of governmental accounts, a sound economic and regulatory environment for private sector activity, and the effectiveness and efficiency of public resource management in accordance with guidelines set out by reputable international entities.

Findings from a study, titled *'Factors influencing community protests in the Mbizana Municipality'* (Nwafor, 2016), point to a profusion of unresolved community complaints, coupled with the slow-paced provision of services as some of the factors responsible for protests in the local municipality. This demonstrated an inability to engage with the community and address their grievances and, specifically, a lack of two good governance principles—responsiveness and participation (African Development Bank, 2008).

While corruption in local government can take many different forms, for the purposes of this article we focus on what Basheka and Mubangizi (2012) denote as 'quiet corruption', which entails a failure on the part of public servants to deliver goods or services. Quiet corruption generally refers to low levels of effort and the deliberate bending of rules for personal advantage, including absenteeism.

Over time, the Mbizana community developed a lack of confidence and resulting trust deficit towards the municipality, creating a gap between municipal representatives and the community at large. There were also high levels of community dissatisfaction with the municipality, and protest action (which tends to be violent at times) was an outlet to demonstrate this. In light of all the aforementioned conditions, the existence of urban conflict in the Mbizana municipality was undoubtedly evident.

This paper outlines a two-phased research and intervention process designed to identify the status quo and then implement remedies to address strained relations between residents and the municipality due to poor governance practices. The hypothesis is that participatory processes and good local governance can be used as a peace-building tool through the empowerment of citizens (with governance knowledge), local political leaders (with systems knowledge) and building bridges between community-based structures and municipal structures of governance (access), resulting in positive peace.

The challenges of rectifying the 'democratic deficit' in post-apartheid local governance

As early as 1989, a governance crisis was declared as underlying a series of Africa's development problems (World Bank 1989: 60–61). Efficient and effective governance at the local level is key to promoting a stable democracy, enabling economic growth and sustaining community development. Furthermore, 'effective local service delivery can increase citizens' trust in the state at both the local and the national levels' (Tschudin and Trithart, 2018: 2). Such service delivery should address imminent socio-economic development threats that confront residents.

Harris (2008: 77) observed that between 1990 and 2002, poverty levels continued to rise in South Africa, with the South African National Defence Force website then highlighting that:

The greatest threat to the people of South Africa at present are socio-economic problems such as poverty, unemployment, lack of education, lack of housing, the high crime rate and violence. One of the policy priorities of the government, therefore, is socio-economic development and upliftment.

Local government, being that tier of governance closest to the people, is the strategic entry point towards fulfilling this transformative socio-economic development agenda. Shah and Shah's (2006: 1) comprehensive definition of local government is instructive for this discussion. They point out that:

Local government refers to specific institutions or entities created by national constitutions... to deliver a range of specified services to a relatively small geographically delineated area... Local governance, therefore, includes the diverse objectives of vibrant, living, working, and environmentally preserved self-governing communities. Good local governance is not just about providing a range of local services but also about preserving the life and liberty of residents, creating space for democratic participation and civic dialogue, supporting market-led and environmentally sustainable local development, and facilitating outcomes that enrich the quality of life of residents.

In this light, post-apartheid South Africa's local governance framework was therefore inevitably premised on a resolute need to remedy the legacy of apartheid and consolidate democracy (Hemson et al, 2009: 157). The

Government Municipal Systems Act (No. 32 of 2000)² mandates municipalities to function as “...an efficient, frontline development agency capable of integrating the activities of all spheres of government...”.

Among the numerous obligations enshrined within this Act was the socio-economic upliftment of local communities, ensuring universal access to essential services, affordable to all, as well as providing for community participation.

Participatory democracy and good governance practices were, in theory, enabled in response to South Africa's ‘democracy turn’ (Bherer et al. 2016). This was marked by a ‘departure from liberal and representative democracy to participatory mechanisms’ centred on citizen input and influence on otherwise political and bureaucratic decision-making processes (Bherer et al. 2016: 225). Coupled with good governance principles, this turn was expected to empower citizens to demand accountable, transparent, responsive and more efficient leadership, particularly at a local level. The country's democratic Constitution (s.152) established objectives of local government, with some being ‘(a) to provide democratic and accountable government for local communities... and (e) to encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in the matters of local government’ (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996).

While these measures were full of promise on paper, on-the-ground experiences of implementation reveal challenges regarding the politics of participation in new democratic arenas (Cornwall and Coelho, 2006: 1). These new measures of participatory democracy have been adopted and implemented with varying degrees of success.

Maureen Dosoudil's³ study of street committees in enhancing participatory democracy in the Emfuleni Local Municipality is a case in point. Dosoudil (2018) observed a capacity gap resulting from the failure of participatory local governance mechanisms. There is a lack of consultation, and the community's day-to-day conversations echoed a desire for citizens to have decision-making powers and capacitation to interact with the new local government functions. The Integrated Development Plan (IDP) consultation meetings—mandatory in law—are not ‘people friendly’. They are often tedious and very long, with communities unable to comprehend the language, terminology or technical aspects of the budget allocation procedures.

This capacity gap, as Dosoudil (2018) argued, could be addressed through civic education implemented by the existing Public Participation Department of the municipality, to teach and empower communities.⁴ In addition, Mohamed (2006: 244) laments the shortcomings of local governance mechanisms, particularly the IDP public consultations noting that:

...the strategic approach to policymaking appears to be problematic from a community participation point of view and disadvantages the informal settlement communities. The IDP proposals, which are presented to communities for consultation, are complex and contain many technical parts that are beyond the ability of the ordinary people to grasp.

This reveals that, in spite of post-apartheid local governance policy commitments and legislated mechanisms, participatory democracy remains elusive. Brooks (2017: 105) concludes that participatory democracy in South Africa has failed, with the consequence being that South African citizens resort to ‘invented spaces’ such as demonstrations, petitions and protests to make their voices heard. Invented spaces are those engineered by citizens who have been marginalised, side-lined and left behind in the processes of local governance. They invent these spaces to reclaim their communities, afford themselves voice and force local authorities to listen to their demands.

Public participation and the limits of state-led participatory spaces

State-led or institutionalised participatory spaces are effective to the extent that they take contextual enablers into account. The works of Cornwall (2002, 2004, 2004a, 2004b), Cornwall and Coelho (2006),

² http://www.energy.gov.za/files/policies/act_municipalsystem_32of2000.pdf.

³ Maureen Dosoudil is an activist and former Councillor of the Emfuleni Municipality.

⁴ The civic education curriculum entails: a) teaching communities about the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders; b) teaching communities about the process of local government decision-making; c) teaching communities how to analyse and evaluate community issues and government policy; d) teaching communities how to use their new knowledge to influence government and community processes; e) capacitating communities to identify skills within the community, skills whose sharing will produce a transfer of skills and begin an educational process; f) Training of Trainers Workshops in which, for example, members of street committees can be educated as trainers and attend the trainer workshops conducted to ensure a continual transfer of skills within and between communities.

Mohamed (2006) and Dosoudil (n.d), Boulding and Wampler (2010) and Lemanski (2017) are illustrative of the limits of institutionalised participatory spaces.

Cornwall (2004: 2) analyses the structural limits of participation as a spatial practice and posits that while much is expected from institutional participatory spaces, they often lack the necessary preconditions for equitable participation and voice. He points to unresolved questions on how to conduct effective participatory democracy: how to involve those who lack presence or a voice in conventional political arenas—lack the resources to engage, and lack a feeling of belonging, of mattering, of being able to contribute or of having anything to gain—all of which continue to present an enduring challenge.

Accordingly, the arenas with which we are concerned may appear as innovations, but are often fashioned out of existing forms through a process of institutional bricolage, using whatever is at hand and re-inscribing existing relationships, hierarchies and rules of the game. These can be termed ‘invited spaces’, and they have been transplanted into institutional landscapes in which entrenched relations of dependency, fear and disprivilege undermine the possibility for the kind of deliberative decision making they are to foster (ibid.). Invited spaces are those created by local governments to conduct public participation where residents are invited into events or sessions whose terms of engagement are dictated to by the government.

Lemanski (2017: 3) notes how state-led participatory processes promise, ideally, that ‘including citizens and civil society in decision-making creates more just and inclusive cities’. Here participatory urban governance is viewed as a mechanism to generate social capital among stakeholders, develop social compacts for sustainable development and promote social cohesion through the implementation of just and equitable development. Drawing from her studies in Cape Town, she demonstrates how state-led participatory processes fail to obtain their professed idealism in practice as they, at times, serve to ‘obstruct rather than assist local democracy’ by undermining and devaluing some citizens’ voices (ibid.).

Part of the problem facing participatory processes is the dominance of these ‘invited spaces’ (Cornwall 2002: 4) organised by the state, which invites citizens through its conceptions of ‘good citizenship’, and directs (imposes) the terms of engagement. Other problems relate to how participation can reinforce asymmetric power relations in a society, where citizens are used to legitimise mainstream views of the elites, who already have greater voice and resources (Lemanski, 2017).

In the Mbizana local municipality, one official disclosed that the municipality had a budget of R360 million (\$ 19.6 million) in 2017, indicating that after personnel costs have been budgeted for there is not enough remaining for service delivery that will cater satisfactorily for all residents.

Lastly Shah and Shah (2006: 6) also raise concerns about the constraints local government faces as ‘the handmaiden of a higher government order’. They argue that in highly polarised contexts, local governance can be vulnerable to manipulation by central governments (and in South Africa, this may be the case for provincial government, too) and used as a pawn that serves to advance partisan political interests at the expense of citizen needs. Within the South African context, for example, the formal channels for municipal participation, the ward committee and ward councillor systems, are perceived in some spaces to have been compromised by partisanship, thus reducing participation to mere tokenism.

Ward committees are a community-based structure created as a statutory body to ‘enhance participatory democracy in local government’ (Municipal Structures Act 117 of 1998). Municipalities are given the power to determine the policies that should govern ward committees. Shah and Shah (2006) concur with sentiments raised by Boulding and Wampler (2010) on the limitations of public participation, noting that in most developing countries local governments and local governance initiatives are poorly funded.

There is a need to establish new forms of participation that are truly democratic and widely representative in nature, giving meaning to conceptions of people-centred democracy. Such interventions include: dialogical public participation, taking advantage of the interactive nature of the Web (using mobile phones, too) and allowing bidirectional communication, the use of user-generated content, and geographic information in the exercise of policymaking (Brovelli et al., 2014). In Van der Meer’s (2017) view, the principles and values of a representative democracy should be deeply embedded in society, enabling responsive governance to thrive.

Cognisant of the above, we sought to actively promote a novel research intervention at the local government level that would promote new mechanisms for inclusive forms of participation. These in turn build better, more responsive governance that translates into flourishing, peaceful communities. Prior to diving into the case study, however, we must first attend to the current dystopian state of reality on the ground.

Service delivery protests as ‘rebellions of the poor’

Since 2004, South Africa has experienced an increasing number of local service delivery protests, running into the thousands and including popular insurrections, viewed in sum by Alexander and Pfaffe (2014: 204) as ‘a rebellion of the poor’. They note how:

Lack of service delivery has been the main issue, but protesting communities have also demanded the removal of corrupt officials, re-demarcation of political boundaries, and employment. In terms of endurance and geographical spread, the movement is unprecedented.

These protests have been growing both in number and intensity, despite the post-apartheid government's notable strides in implementing, at various levels, participatory spaces to foster engagement between leadership and citizens, such as the IDP formulation process and the ward committees. These protests confirm citizens' dissatisfaction with governance as further illustrated in the works of Alexander (2010), Bond and Mottiar (2012), Von Holdt (2013), Mbazira (2013) and Netswera and Kgalane (2014).

From these protests, it is evident that citizens use service delivery and the conduct (perceived or real) of municipal officials as a yardstick for measuring the post-apartheid state's capacity and ability to transform their lives. Mbazira (2013) compares South Africa and Uganda, arguing that these protests are not unique to South Africa. Mbazira further argues that the South African protests are bigger in intensity and frequency, cementing Alexander and Pfaffe's (2014) sentiments that the endurance and geographical spread of these protests is unprecedented.

Bond and Mottiar (2012) attribute the protests to dissatisfaction with socio-economic deprivation, as they have mainly stemmed from shack settlements and townships, spaces characterised by inadequate service delivery, poor or absent public consultation and lack of accountability by local councillors. In the same vein, Von Holdt (2013: 591, 594) seems to support the notion of protests as participation in which violence is a critical resource in the struggle for ascendancy. Democratic institutions are unable to regulate this action, while protests are viewed as violent responses of the dominated in which:

Communities are with increasing frequency mobilising and engaging in protest to raise demands for jobs, social services and consultation. At one level, these protests are a manifestation of citizens confronting authorities, and constitute a widening of the space of democracy and participation.

To Von Holdt, the protests attest to South Africa's transitioning into what he terms "a violent democracy" in which new forms of violence emerge within historical (apartheid's) patterns of violence. Netswera and Kgalame's (2014: 261) analysis explores this historical dimension. They explain how the injustice occasioned by the separate development policies that characterised the local government system prior to 1994 was a rallying point for anti-government protests by black citizens. They further observe that these protests were violent and usually resulted in the damage of municipal properties and loss of lives.

South Africa's service delivery-related protests are a threat to urban peace, indicating how precarious human security is. There is, accordingly, an urgent need to address this reality through peacebuilding. Reychler and Paffenhouz (2001: 12) explain that the overall aim of peacebuilding is to transform conflicts constructively and to create a sustainable peace environment characterised by '...the absence of physical violence, the elimination of unacceptable political, economic and cultural forms of discrimination; a high level of internal and external legitimacy or support; self-sustainability, and a propensity to enhance the constructive transformation of conflicts.'

Good governance as a mechanism for peacebuilding

It follows that good governance practices are important tools in pursuit of peacebuilding. Call (2012: 34; 2015) demonstrates this aptly when stating:

The main instrument of self-sustained peace...was a self-sustained polity or state with the ability to resolve conflict without reliance on outside troops. In essence, the success of these peace operations depended on the emergence of a successful state, which made governance key to peace.

To combat the variations in violence, Galtung called for nations to invest in the pursuit of positive peace, which focuses on entrenching structures and processes for economic, social and political justice for humanity. In 1994, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) launched the Human Development Report (1994: 3),⁵ emergent from Galtung's insights, calling for a departure from state security to human security and noting that:

⁵ http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/255/hdr_1994_en_complete_nostats.pdf [Last accessed 18/04/20].

For most people today, a feeling of insecurity arises more from worries about daily life than from the dread of a cataclysmic world event. Job security, income security, health security, environmental security, and security from crime – these are the emerging concerns of human security all over the world.

The UNDP's Human Development Report (1994:16)⁶ calls for an integration of the peace and development agenda towards the promotion of sustainable human development, defined as '...pro-people, pro-jobs and pro-nature'. In addition to this, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2282, unanimously adopted in 2016,⁷ reviewed the UN peacebuilding architecture, noting that 'inclusivity is key to advancing national peacebuilding processes and objectives in order to ensure that the needs of all segments of society are taken into account...Stressing that civil society can play an important role in advancing efforts to sustain peace'. This call is further echoed in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16,⁸ that seeks to 'promote...peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels'.

In principle, governance is the necessary mechanism to build 'peaceful and inclusive societies' and involves interactions among structures and processes that determine how power is exercised, decisions are made, and the input of other citizens is received (Plumptre and Graham, 1999). Fundamentally, it is about how decision makers are held accountable for the decisions that are made and how they have used the power that was entrusted to them. The SDG principle of inclusivity originates in the concept of good governance, whose principles entail accountability, transparency, responsiveness, equity and inclusiveness, and participation (African Development Bank, 2008; Economic Cooperation and Development, 1995; European Commission, 2001; International Monetary Fund, 1997; United Nations, 2014; World Bank, 2007).

A common thread runs through peacebuilding: good governance and sustainable development. That is the prerequisite for an accountability relationship from which citizens as rights holders can premise their demands for good service delivery. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) best captures the essence of governance as a relationship between citizens and the state:

Effective service provision entails the efficient and effective provision of public services, but also giving citizens and groups within society – regardless of gender, religion, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity or class – the opportunity to participate in the relevant decision-making processes (2016: 5).

The Mbizana case (2017–2020)

Our case study draws on almost three years of grassroots democratisation work through research and intervention conducted in the Mbizana local municipality in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa.

In 2016, GGA launched the Government Performance Index (GPI),⁹ a league-table ranking all of South Africa's local municipalities, ahead of local government elections that year. Mbizana Local Municipality ranked lowest nationally, sparking an interest to conduct in-depth research on the ground to understand the prevailing municipal dynamics with an aim to implement an intervention strategy to ameliorate governance there.

Methodology

Within the broad context of participatory action research, we used a mixed methodology approach comprising both quantitative and qualitative methods in a phased roll-out.

A number of steps were taken to ensure the ethical integrity of the research. Confidentiality of respondents was assured by making responses anonymous. Respondents were informed of the objectives of the research and interviews were conducted after securing their consent. The great majority of the identified research participants agreed to take part in the study, although a small minority refused to be interviewed. Measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and transparency regarding the data.

⁶ http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/255/hdr_1994_en_complete_nostats.pdf [Last accessed 18/04/20].

⁷ <https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12340.doc.htm> [Last accessed 18/04/20].

⁸ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg16> [Last accessed 18/04/20].

⁹ The GPI ranks South Africa's local and metropolitan municipalities. District municipalities were excluded on account of limited information and because they are made up of local municipalities. The rankings were determined using data gathered on 15 equally weighted indicators across three main clusters: administration, economic development and service delivery. The data for the GPI was sourced from a range of credible sources like Statistics South Africa, Auditor General's Reports, National Treasury and others.

Phase one (March 2017–March 2019)

We commenced with a scoping exercise to understand the topography of our research area. In June 2017, fieldwork was undertaken on a citizen survey of 1,000 respondents across the chosen 32 km transect, spanning the urban centre of Mbizana (Bizana town) to the deep rural area of Nkantolo village. The Mbizana local municipality, at the time, had a population of about 300,000 residents. The sample had a good spread across age (all respondents were above 18 years old), employment and education demographics, although there were significantly more female respondents.

Capi surveys were conducted using CommCare, an online survey tool with a downloadable app for smartphones or tablets. The sample frame ran on a transect anchored along the R61, between Nkantolo and Bizana, including the town of Bizana and its peri-urban surrounds, as well a number of villages.

Data collection was done by carefully selected and trained fieldworkers who live in the region, who set out with smartphones with installed CommCare software containing the survey questionnaire. Cameras and sound recorders were also used. While the quantitative data was being collected at the various waypoints, a second team of commissioned researchers conducted informal economy activity mapping and surveys with informal businesses along the transect. Meanwhile, a third team conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with visible local leaders such as municipal officials, traditional and religious leaders, and businesspeople, among others.

Once the research was complete and preliminary findings available, feedback sessions were conducted in the form of hybrid focus groups in conveniently located community halls in Ludeke village and Bizana town. Approximately 100 research participants who had indicated that they were interested in the findings of the study were invited. During these sessions, the preliminary research findings were shared in an aggregated form and participants were encouraged to ask questions to the researchers. In Part two of these feedback sessions participants were sub-divided into groups of 10 for the 'Imagine Bizana' exercise¹⁰ using Bliss Browne's appreciative inquiry methods implemented in the early days of 'Imagine Chicago' (Browne and Jain, 2002).

The motivation here was for the participants to get to meet and be in conversation with one another as residents of the municipality about the ideas they have for the future of their communities. This 'imagine Bizana' exercise became important as a means to grow social capital in the community. A plenary then enabled each group to present its deliberations. This approach is underpinned by theories, such as asset-based community development (ABCD), that believe communities have resources from within, which must be identified and exploited before seeking external intervention. In a poor municipality such as Mbizana, this is an important approach for people, for them to see their communities as assets rather than as places of precarity and deprivation. Outcomes were packaged into the final phase one research report shared with municipal officials during a consultative workshop.

Phase two (March–December 2019)

The intervention process in phase two was also based on ABCD, allowing a collaborative effort between GGA and stakeholders to elicit more research and observations while imparting crucial knowledge using the civic education approach. The signing of the MOU in March 2019 demonstrated buy-in from the municipality, meaning GGA could now act as an 'honest broker' entrusted with building a bridge between the citizens and the municipality. This was made possible by undertaking sound, committed and transparent community entry.

The citizen survey had revealed a chasm between residents and the municipality. Taking advantage of the local government legislative design in South Africa, we targeted ward committees as the statutory structure envisaged to be the linkage between the residents and the municipality. Ward committee members are not classically public representatives (as they don't sit in council or make decisions on behalf of the municipality); rather they were designed to act as a safeguard between residents and the council to assist ward councillors. They were therefore selected because the statute clearly outlines that they exist to 'enhance participatory democracy in local government' (Municipal Structures Act 117 of 1998). Legislatively, they are already seen as the bridge between residents and the municipality.

Phase two was characterised by two workshops exclusively for ward committees, a focus group discussion with the public participation unit (PPU), a technical capacity building workshop for the finance division,

¹⁰ The Imagine Mbizana exercise was the first step to public participation. The attendants visualised what they perceived as the best Mbizana that they could be and ideally how they wanted their municipality to be. From this exercise, plans were drawn up on how to assist and empower the Mbizana community to realise their envisioned municipality. This was carried out in different stages and with workshops, which are further outlined in the section on building bridges.

and a bridging exercise workshop that brought together ward committee members, the PPU and some councillors. Briefly summarised:

1. The first workshop was a baseline conversation with the aim of ward committee members codifying their knowledge about their roles in the ward; public participation within the municipality; community profiling; and Integrated Development Plan (IDP) formulation, highlighting the importance of stakeholders to their communities. This workshop was made up of four segments, comprising Knowledge Baseline Questionnaire, Community Profile Questionnaire, Stakeholder Mapping and Izimbizo (discussions).
2. The second workshop comprised three parts. Firstly, an interactive capacity-building session saw ward committee members sharing their experiences and ideas while receiving knowledge on key thematic areas. Thereafter a baselining focus group discussion meeting occurred with municipal personnel whose duties included safeguarding the municipality's public-participation work and stakeholder management. Finally, the observation of public participation in proposed municipal by-laws was conducted.
3. Focus group discussions with the Mbizana municipality PPU explored the current practices of public participation, the role and functionality of ward committee members and the community's needs. Key outcomes of the focus group discussion include IDP formulation and the necessary steps of returning 'a voice' and power to the people.
4. A technical capacity building workshop, implemented by a qualified Chartered Accountant specializing in local governance, was conducted in collaboration with the International Republican Institute (IRI), a United States not-for-profit organisation supported by the National Endowment for Democracy. Topics included roles, various structures in the municipality, value systems and governance structures, with an IRI-conducted action-plan formulation task to help in identifying sticking points, remedies and key responsibilities, and to track progress in implementing solutions.
5. The final workshop was a 'bridging exercise', bringing together the ward committees, municipal officials and some councillors under one roof (after they had not met in almost a year) to interrogate the existing municipal Public Participation Framework. Revisions and areas of improvement were suggested in a plenary session. We intentionally moved this workshop away from one of the usual 'invited spaces' for ward committees, where they come in without much of a voice on what should happen, towards a citizen- and stakeholder-centric model of public participation, demonstrating to municipal officials how they can conduct such participatory meetings. The end product was an inclusive draft public participation framework document.

It was clear that our dialogical public-participation approach was important in fostering social cohesion, minimising tension and building a case for collaborative governance between citizens and the municipality for the achievement of sustainable development. Such an approach promotes a transformative way of building peace in small urban contexts (towns such as Bizana) and more remote peri-urban and rural areas where stakeholders are often marginalized or excluded.

Presentation of the research and intervention findings

Phase one

Overall findings from the citizen survey indicated that the population was in a financially precarious state, with a low income (median personal income = R760 per month, almost \$48.45¹¹) and household sizes that were found to be moderate (mode = 4), although this was influenced by outward migration. There was a heavy reliance on government grants (social security) as a primary source of income or to supplement income.

The outcomes of the citizen survey indicated that a chasm existed between citizens and the municipality, necessitating the need for a project that focused on systems of local governance centred on public participation. The study showed that Mbizana local municipality does not have enough resources necessary for effective service delivery.

Interviews with visible stakeholders indicated a clear problem of communication and relationship-building between them and the municipality. This posed a hindrance to delivery of services in a collaborative manner. The common view between community leaders and the community at large was in how they perceived the municipality as operating as a closed system with a lack of transparency. One business leader

¹¹ The currency exchange rate stipulating that is was as at March/April 2020.

stated that 'greater cooperation between the municipality and business could benefit development in the area, especially in dealing with unemployment challenges that beset young people'.

Research participants alleged there was a patronage system within the municipality with suppression of information and the manipulation of opportunities.

The findings also provided some illuminating insights into the drivers/sources of political (mis)trust that could lead to tensions and conflict, rendering urban peace fragile. The spatial reality of an urban-rural divide creates difficulties for governance, both at the level of reach (how resources are disbursed) and voice (how citizens are empowered to participate in the processes of governance). At a local level, the function of governance structures is 'to give people a voice, both by representing their constituencies and giving them opportunities to participate at the local level and by relaying their interests and needs to higher-level actors' (Tschudin and Trithart, 2018: 4).

With respect to governance, residents perceived the municipality to be overwhelmingly corrupt and ineffective. **Figure 1** illustrates the findings of the Mbizana Citizen Survey (2017), with relatively high levels of dissatisfaction with local government.

In the business survey (with just over 100 respondents participating in the informal economy), more than 60% of the respondents were dissatisfied in respect of the KPAs (above) that the municipality had itself posted. In the citizen survey, dissatisfaction ranged from 57% to 68%. Residents appeared most dissatisfied with the municipality's (in)ability to facilitate a people-driven economy (68%), investment in fighting poverty (66%), provision of affordable services (62%), and protection and preservation of the environment (59%). It was clear that the perception was that the municipality was not making enough effort towards achieving these. No wonder then, when asked how they felt about the municipality, two in three (66%) of the residents said they were unhappy, with 19% feeling indifferent at 50/50 and only a fifth (19%) saying they felt happy.

The findings of our study corroborated observations made by Empowerdex (2009: 19) as cited in Nwafor (2016), highlighting that more than half of the population in the Eastern Cape province lacked access to the basic facilities for sanitation. Many communal areas have inadequate connection to the power grid and households depend solely on other means of energy for cooking and heating, predominantly open fires.

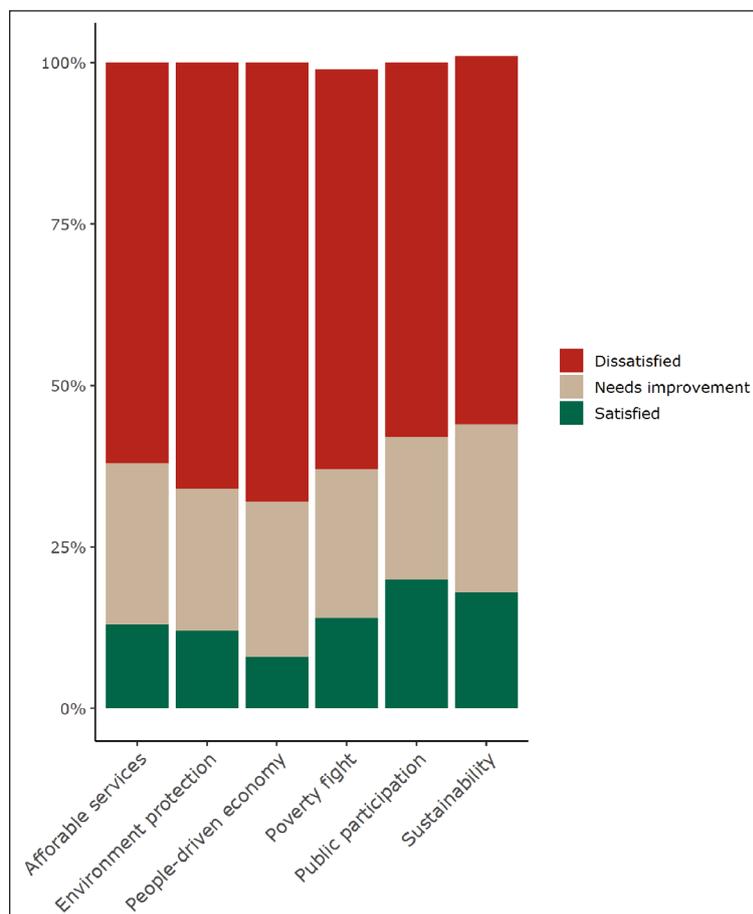


Figure 1: Rates of dissatisfaction amongst citizens.

The high levels of dissatisfaction contributed to the rising number of protests in the Mbizana Municipality. Tsheola (2012) emphasises that service delivery is at the core of violent protests in South Africa. Mamokhere (2019) posits that the underlying factors behind service delivery protests in South Africa are unemployment, poverty, lack of access to information, political instability, corruption, nepotism and the lack of public participatory frameworks; this tallies with some of the outcomes of the Mbizana study.

In separate, nationally representative research from 2016 (comprising of a sample of 2,291 respondents), GGA found that more than 50% of participants felt that citizens were resorting to violent protest to have their grievances heard. **Figure 2** represents the findings on their perceptions regarding violent protests. The fact that the majority of respondents believed that citizens were voicing their frustration through violence is a major concern, especially in a democracy that is based on fundamental rights and freedoms, including that of assembly and peaceful protest.

An interrogation of the citizen survey findings from Mbizana (2017) shows that people are materially deprived, revealing limited sources of income and a high reliance on the state’s social security grants. This material deprivation, coupled with visible despondency towards the municipality, illuminated the social distance between the governed and the governors. Accordingly, we saw this reality as a tinderbox that could detonate and cause massive fractures within the local municipality, especially at the urban centre, where people find it easier to organise due to ease of mobility.

Phase two

Observations and findings revealed the existence of a weak public-participation framework, which relied upon the implementation of public consultations, particularly via road shows on the infrastructure development plan and the municipal budget. Our interaction with ward committees revealed that citizens yearn for a sustained communication channel with the municipality. Some participants voiced frustration:

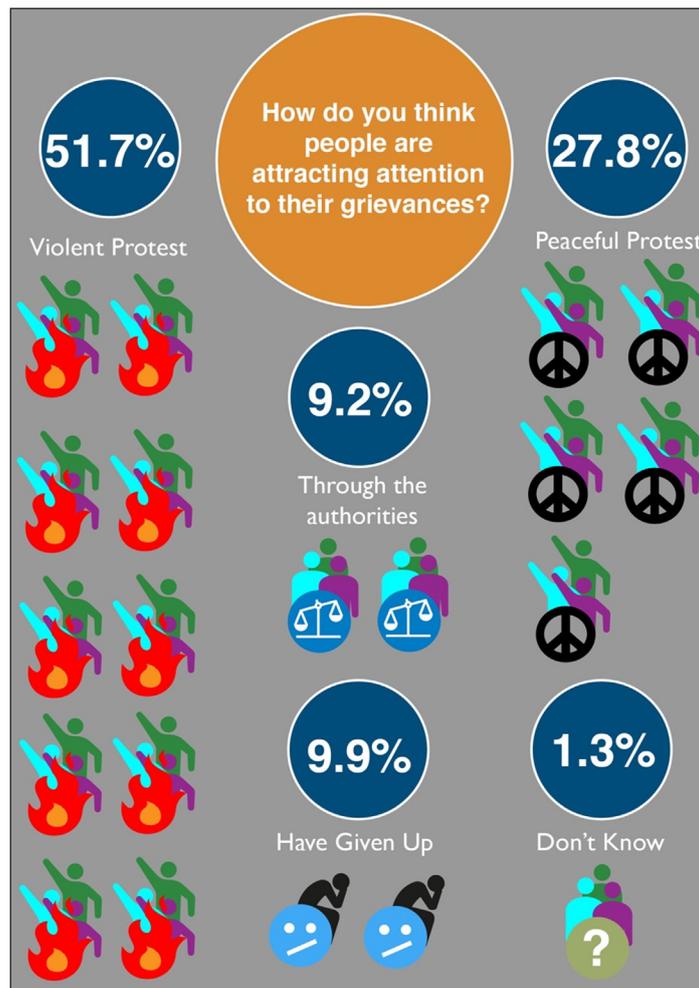


Figure 2: Perceptions of how citizens address grievances (GGA, 2016).

we are tired of being made runners for the municipality when road shows are coming to our communities, we want to be engaged meaningfully and be briefed properly on the issues to be discussed. At times we appear clueless when the public is being consulted. We must be empowered enough to make meaningful contributions and not be sidelined.

Others noted with worry that the ward councillors do not always update them because: 'when you are an active and visible ward committee member you tend to be perceived as a threat by the councillor. They think you might replace them in the next election'.

As GGA we sought to work closely with the Public Participation Unit (PPU) of the municipality to try and broker a revised and improved public participation framework (PPF). One official from the PPU stated that: 'the biggest challenge with public consultation meetings is that they turn into service delivery complaint sessions, rather than contributing to agenda items needing people's views such as the Integrated Development Plan or the municipal budget'. This meant the municipality itself needed the assistance on how to reframe public participation processes. Irrespective of an intervention, public participation must be institutionalised and there must be political buy-in. We institutionalised the PPF using a bridging exercise of bringing municipal officials, some councillors and ward committees into a meeting after they had not met for close to a year.

The meeting between these parties was a bid to reframe terms of engagement between residents and the municipality. During the meeting, all parties were given an opportunity to envision the architecture of how public consultation should be conducted within the municipality to centre the voice of citizens; create transparency and accountability in the functioning of the municipality; and to encourage ethical and responsive leadership from officials and elected representatives. A ward committee member voiced enthusiasm for the newly proposed approach, suggesting that: 'this will empower us to be more effective in our communities. We must get all information from the municipality ahead of public consultative meetings in order for us to be able to brief and prepare residents on agenda items'. The renewed spirit of engagement was then documented into the final PPF that GGA handed over to the municipality. That PPF was to be adopted by the municipal council as a way to institutionalise it so that it could become operative.

Peacebuilding in Mbizana

A key outcome of the study was that the participatory processes enabled the building of confidence between the local municipality and community leaders. The local participatory processes were transformative in that they enabled the municipal officials to tackle the quiet corruption that was prevailing and adopt better governance practices. A capacity-building session for municipal officials in the office of the chief financial officer was implemented by a qualified chartered accountant with vast experience in the area of local government and governance. These officials were empowered in the following fields:

1. The role of the various structures of governance in the municipality (isolating governance over finances)
2. The role of the chief financial officer in enabling governance in the municipality
3. The specific roles of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) and provincial/national treasuries in governance
4. The responsibility of governance structures over the reports of the office of the auditor-general
5. Key areas of the municipality where governance is a cause for concern. In particular, supply chain and expenditure management are pivotal to the collapse of governance in local government
6. Unlocking the value of systems to strengthen governance.

The finance officials were able to identify the major problems that they faced and formulate an action plan to address them accordingly. They proposed how to rectify the challenges by adopting an action plan that could be used to track their progress in implementing solutions identified with their collaboration.

Concluding Remarks

This paper examined how bad local governance negatively impacts the socio-economic development trajectory of communities. It sought to explore the transformative role participatory processes and good governance played as peace-building mechanisms to achieve positive peace in the Mbizana local municipality. Our hypothesis was that participatory and good local governance that fosters localised peace could be achieved

only with a functional nexus between public representatives and the residents they serve. This relies on a functioning channel of communication that centres dialogue as the *modus operandi* for public participation.

A thorough examination of the literature revealed the following key aspect of current knowledge/practice: the conventional mechanisms of public participation rely on 'invited spaces' that are engineered by government itself, within which residents participate as invited guests. The gap in the literature is that there is great focus on the critique of conventional public participation mechanisms and less on remedies to deconstruct these 'invited spaces' and re-engineer or 'imagine' new forms of engagement. We argue that by bringing the voice of the people and centering them as collaborators in local governance, the current paper contributes to filling that gap.

The current COVID-19 global pandemic has witnessed the resurgence of life at the 'local' level. Coupled with this greater focus on the microcosm, it is evident how localized events can trigger and catalyse macrocosmic events, resulting in global protest action at the meta-level. One such moment arose with the extrajudicial killing of George Floyd, murdered by Derek Chauvin and several other police officers in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020. Local protests arose almost instantaneously and spread rapidly across the United States, extending around the world with the resulting aftermath directed at sustained, systemic and entrenched injustice (see Anderson, 2017).

What this lays bare is the failure of 'invited' spaces, where the state with its various levels of governance pays lip service only to inclusive and participatory dialogue. Citizens then 'invent' spaces where they not only 'imagine' but actively promote alternative spaces for protest intended to advance proactive change (See also Brown, 2015, who has written on dissent and the possibility of politics within a South African context). When citizens innovate and invent spaces, it demonstrates the levels of strained relationships between the governed and the governors, often leading to violence and necessitating mediation to resolve the impasse. The social action research intervention in Mbizana becomes important as an exercise in ameliorating strained relations while offering a peaceful alternative by promoting real participation via inclusive citizen voice and policy development by responsive local authorities.

The key takeaway from the study is thus the transformative nature of local participatory processes that rebuilt community confidence in municipal authorities. Growing trust with cooperative local authorities in communities is far more effective than perceiving them as a threat or barrier to interventions. The combination of participatory processes and good governance played an important role in actively restoring urban peace in the Mbizana municipality. Future research interventions could benefit from creating sustainable bidirectional forms of engagement, taking advantage of affordable Information and Communication Technology (ICT) platforms. This will undo the limitations of town hall meetings and cater for the depressed socio-economic realities of many municipalities, which at times make it impossible for people to participate physically. Inclusion and responsiveness remain integral to achieving sustainable local peace in Mbizana, as in Minneapolis, and beyond.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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