

Evaluating Youth Participation in Mogale City Local Municipality's Decision-Making Processes

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OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development, Ontario International Development Agency, Canada.

ISSN 1923-6654 (print) ISSN 1923-6662 (online) www.oidaijsd.com

Also available at <https://www.ssrn.com/index.cfm/en/oida-intl-journal-sustainable-dev/>

Abstract: This paper examines the transformation of decision-making processes within the Mogale City Local Municipality (MCLM) with a focus on enhancing youth participation. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of involving youth in governance structures to ensure policies and decisions are inclusive and reflective of diverse perspectives. However, the extent to which MCLM has embraced this imperative remains uncertain. Through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, this study investigates the mechanisms and initiatives employed by MCLM to engage young people in decision-making processes. It assesses the effectiveness of these strategies in fostering active and meaningful youth participation. Drawing on interviews, surveys, and document analysis, the research examines the perceptions of both youth representatives and municipal officials regarding the level of youth involvement, barriers encountered, and the impact on decision outcomes. The findings suggest a variety of approaches have been implemented, including youth councils, consultation forums, and capacity-building programs. However, challenges such as tokenistic engagement, limited resources, and a lack of institutional support hinder the realisation of genuine youth empowerment. Moreover, there is evidence of discrepancies between youth aspirations and municipal priorities, raising questions about the alignment of decision-making processes with the needs and interests of young people. This paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on youth participation in local governance by providing insights into the specific context of Mogale City. By critically evaluating the extent of transformation in decision-making processes, it offers recommendations for enhancing youth engagement and ensuring their voices are integral to municipal decision-making. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of inclusive governance structures that recognize and harness the potential of youth as key stakeholders in shaping the future of their communities.

Keywords: decision-making processes, empowerment, inclusivity, local governance, youth participation.

Introduction and/or background

The issue of youth participation in governance has garnered significant attention both internationally and within specific regions such as Africa in general and South Africa in particular. Over the years, various strategies have been proposed and implemented to encourage the active involvement of young people in decision-making processes at different levels of government. The efficacy of these strategies in engaging present-day youth remains a subject of debate. The [15] highlights the importance of creating avenues for youth participation in governance that address pressing social and economic challenges. Similarly, [4] emphasizes the need for inclusive governance structures that incorporate the voices of young people. However, despite these calls for action, [13] observes that traditional mechanisms of youth participation often fall short in effectively engaging modern youth.

[7] suggests that one reason for the ineffectiveness of existing strategies lies in their failure to adapt to the evolving needs and preferences of young people. Moreover, [11] argue that institutional barriers and bureaucratic processes hinder youth from actively participating in decision-making. In contrast, Ubi [45] contends that innovative approaches, such as youth-led initiatives and digital platforms, hold promise in enhancing youth engagement in governance. [43] echoes this sentiment, emphasizing the role of technology in connecting young people with decision-makers.

However, [12] cautions against relying solely on technology, noting that access and digital literacy remain significant barriers for many youths, particularly in Africa. [8] further emphasizes the importance of addressing socio-economic disparities that limit youth participation in governance.

[19] argue that effective youth participation requires a multi-dimensional approach that addresses both structural and cultural barriers. [42] suggests that mentorship programs and capacity-building initiatives can empower youth to engage meaningfully in decision-making processes. [2] highlights the role of education in fostering a culture of civic participation among young people. Additionally, [23] emphasize the need for targeted interventions to address the specific needs and aspirations of youth from diverse backgrounds.

Considering these perspectives, it is evident that the effectiveness of strategies for youth participation in governance varies depending on context and implementation. The context of this paper is Mogale City Municipality which is in the Gauteng province, South Africa. The municipality in question is a conurbation comprising several urban and peri-urban areas, including Krugersdorp, Kagiso, and Munsieville, among others. Mogale City Municipality is part of the West Rand District Municipality and lies within the Johannesburg Metropolitan Area. It is home to a diverse community. Specific demographic data, including population size and youth population statistics, can vary depending on the timeframe and source of information [29]. Mogale City has a significant youth population, comprising a considerable proportion of its total inhabitants. This article seeks to explore the strategies implemented in Mogale City Local Municipality to motivate the youth to actively participate in local government decision-making processes.

Literature review

Youth participation in local government decision-making processes is crucial for fostering democracy, promoting civic engagement, and ensuring the representation of diverse perspectives within communities as well as achieving sustainable development [17, 21]. In South Africa, the post-apartheid era has witnessed government efforts in the form of legislation, policies, frameworks, and institutions established to enhance youth involvement in local governance [1]. [38, 39, 40] and [41] urge municipalities to develop mechanisms to ensure community participation. This includes youth participation. The South African Youth Council has played a significant role in advocating for youth representation in municipal decision-making [1]. Additionally, initiatives such as youth councils and youth parliaments have been established in various municipalities to provide platforms for youth voices.

Historic Apathy for Youth Participation in Decision-making Processes

Historically, several factors such as a lack of desire for improvement, awareness of the need, an unfavorable climate, inadequate feedback mechanisms, resistance to change, and conflicts within youth participation dynamics have hindered or affected youth participation in decision-making processes. These obstacles have been extensively discussed in scholarly literature. For instance, [20] emphasizes the pivotal role of intrinsic motivation in driving successful youth participation, suggesting that young people must possess a strong desire to enhance both their own lives and that of their communities. Lack of such motivation can lead to disinterest in participation matters [16]. Moreover, [20] points out that limited awareness of the necessity for participation poses another significant barrier. Even when the need for involvement arises, young people often fail to recognize or respond to it, resulting in stagnant participation efforts.

Additionally, an unfavorable climate within institutions and communities further exacerbates the challenge. [33, 34] and [28] highlight the prevalent mistrust among the youth toward local government systems, inhibiting their willingness to participate. Lack of cooperation between stakeholders involved in youth participation exacerbates ineffective interaction and participation outcomes.

Feedback mechanisms also play a crucial role in sustaining youth engagement. [20] emphasizes the importance of ensuring that young people receive acknowledgment and response to their inputs, fostering a sense of value and empowerment in their participation efforts.

Furthermore, resistance to change within established bureaucratic systems presents another barrier. [20] argues that entrenched routines and institutional structures often prioritize maintaining the status quo, hindering the adoption of alternative approaches that embrace youth participation. Moreover, conflicts arising from participation processes pose significant challenges. Young people may experience frustration and anger when their inputs are disregarded, leading to increased conflict levels [20]. [6] highlights the agency of youth in decision-making processes, emphasizing their analytical capabilities and potential for social change. However, these conflicts may arise due to disparities in perspectives and priorities among youth, professionals, interest groups, and decision-makers. Despite these challenges, it's essential to recognize the potential of youth in driving social change and transformation. [18] underscores the

significance of youth agency in shaping societal landscapes, challenging conventional thinking about their role in decision-making processes. [14] highlights the dual nature of youth as both contributors to and victims of social ills, underscoring the complexity of their engagement.

Moreover, youth cultures offer insights into their needs and actions, reflecting socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts. However, adults often overlook or dismiss these actions, failing to engage meaningfully in decision-making processes [6].

Systems and Structures that Promote Active Youth Participation

Various strategies have been implemented in municipalities in South Africa and beyond to encourage young people to actively engage in decision-making processes. One such strategy is the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), which involves the entire municipality and its citizens in finding solutions for long-term development [35]. The IDP coordinates planning efforts across different spheres of government and institutions, addressing various aspects of development for sustainable empowerment and growth [46]. The legal requirement of the IDP underscores its importance as a management tool for local government transformation [30].

Youth representation in municipal structures is another approach adopted to enhance participation. Municipalities like Mogale City Local Municipality have established youth councils or forums to allow young people to contribute to decision-making processes [29, 36].

Outreach and engagement programs are also common, aiming to educate youth about local governance and encourage their participation through workshops and campaigns [24]. The "Youth Engage" program in Mogale City exemplifies such efforts, offering interactive sessions and mentorship opportunities [29]. Furthermore, municipalities are leveraging technology and social media platforms to engage young people. Platforms like social media groups, enable youth to share views and provide feedback on local policies and projects [26, 44]. However, digital divides and access barriers remain challenges [44]. Capacity building and skills development programs are also prevalent, aiming to equip youth with the necessary knowledge and skills for effective engagement [29].

Despite these efforts, challenges persist, including tokenism, lack of meaningful engagement, resource constraints, and sustainability issues [27, 32]. Moreover, young people's limited interest and mistrust in local government systems hinder their participation [28, 33, 34].

Understanding and addressing the barriers to youth participation in decision-making processes require comprehensive strategies that are beyond mere legislative compliance but foster intrinsic motivation, raise awareness, cultivate supportive climates, establish effective feedback mechanisms, navigate resistance to change, manage conflicts, and recognize the agency and contributions of youth in shaping their communities and societies. While MCLM has striven to motivate youth participation through various strategies, more still needs to be done to foster meaningful civic engagement among young citizens.

Theoretical / Conceptual Framework

The study is guided by positive youth development and community youth development theories. The Positive Youth Development (PYD) theory emphasizes fostering assets and strengths in young people to promote their overall well-being and development. [22] highlights the importance of promoting thriving among youth through opportunities for competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. The Community Youth Development (CYD) theory focuses on the role of community structures, resources, and social support systems in promoting positive outcomes for young people. [25] argue that communities should facilitate youth development through clear and intentional interventions and policies. The PYD theory provides a framework for understanding how to promote positive outcomes and resilience among young people, while CYD theory offers insights into the importance of community-level factors in shaping youth development. By integrating these theories, the study aims to explore how both individual strengths and community resources can contribute to youth well-being, thereby providing a holistic understanding of youth development processes.

Methodology

The study used mixed methods which [5, 9] as well as [10] justify based on its ability to provide a comprehensive understanding, enhance validity, and offer complementary insights into complex phenomena. Data was collected in November 2019 using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. A team of four researchers were involved in data collection. Purposeful sampling was used in this study. Purposeful sampling enables the selection of study participants based on their specific knowledge of, and/or experience with, the focus of study [37]. The following table

summarises the target groups, the sampling technique, data collection methods and related description of the methodology.

Table 1: Summary of target groups and sampling technique

Target group	Sampling Technique	Data Collection Methods	Description/Other Details
Group 1: Youths	Purposive sampling	Survey using questionnaire	299 youths from churches, clubs, youth groups, schools, and households
Group 2: Youths	Purposive sampling	In-depth semi-structured interviews	20 young people from 4 wards (5 from each ward). These should have participated in the survey.
Group 3: Key Informants	Purposive sampling	Semi-structured interviews	10 key informants from government entities and youth organisations
Group 4: Youths	Purposive sampling	Focus group discussion	30 young people in 3 focus group discussions. Each group with 10 young people

Source: *Fieldwork 2019*.

Thematic analysis was used to identify emergent and recurring patterns in the data whose findings are reproduced below.

Findings and Discussions

The research examined various aspects of youth participation within MCLM, including legislative compliance, communication strategies, promotion of active involvement, partisan engagement, sectoral involvement, participation in local development projects, and skills development initiatives. However, it was found that there were shortcomings in several areas. These included inadequate intersectionality in participation, as well as limitations in the monitoring and evaluation strategy. The following sections will present and discuss these findings in detail.

Legislative compliance of MCLM

While the South African legislation supports public participation, including that of young people, the existing national and municipal-level laws lack explicit coverage of youth participation. MCLM is expected to adhere to various legislative instruments, but these are fragmented and not easily understood or implemented by both the officials and young people. The Integrated Youth Development Plan and Strategy (IYDPS) overseen by the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) aims to simplify legislation and promote youth participation. However, there is a gap in translating national strategies into local municipality contexts, leading to confusion and inefficiency. MCLM's emphasis on "Youth Empowerment" and "Youth Development" in documents reflects a focus on service delivery rather than meaningful participation. There's a disconnect between policy intentions and practical implementation, with a notable absence of youth-focused frameworks within broader public participation structures. While there are national frameworks promoting youth participation, MCLM lacks alignment with these at the local level. The municipality's understanding of public participation does not explicitly include young people, leading to a mismatch between policy intent and practice. This confusion and lack of confidence in the policies and framework became apparent during interviews with youths. One of the youth respondents argued that *"we are still marginalised despite the legislative and policy framework that exists for MCLM to use to include us in decision-making processes"* (Interviewee 5: Kagiso 3). However, the MCLM official argued that he understood the concept of public participation as being: *the involvement of all stakeholders in municipal governance matters that affect them. This had been the common understanding and conceptualization of the concept in which youth participation took place in the Mogale City Local Municipality* (Key informant 1: MCLM).

Interviews reveal that young people feel marginalized despite existing legislative frameworks. MCLM's focus on superficial activities like celebrations rather than substantive youth empowerment exacerbates this sentiment. There's a lack of strategic guidance for youth to engage constructively in decision-making processes, leading to instances of protest rather than dialogue. Despite national efforts to promote youth participation in decision-making processes, MCLM faces challenges in translating these into actionable strategies at the local level. There's a need for clearer policy frameworks, better contextualization of legislation, and genuine engagement with young people to ensure

meaningful participation in governance processes.

Communication strategy of MCLM

The research delved into the importance of effective communication to engage youth and other stakeholders in civic activities. The following are the sources of information that form the communication strategy by the MCLM to ensure youth participation in decision-making processes.

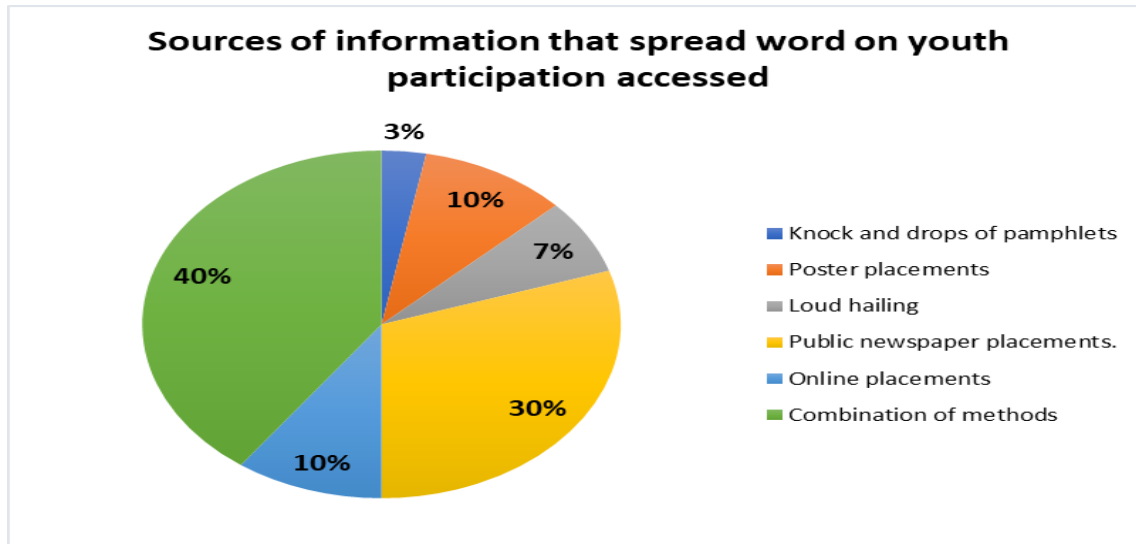


Figure 1: Sources of information on youth participation.

Source: Fieldwork, 2019.

Findings revealed that while MCLM utilizes various information dissemination methods, such as newspaper placements and the community radio, it underutilizes social media platforms favored by young people. Limited resources and expertise hinder MCLM's ability to adapt to evolving communication channels. Furthermore, the lack of integration between different municipal departments impairs external communication efforts. Stakeholder participation initiatives suffer from outdated contact databases, hindering outreach to new participants. The absence of a dedicated communication strategy tailored to youth involvement exacerbates these challenges. According to a young person interviewed in Munsieville, "we have seen newspaper placements, a few social media posts and some posters on the street poles in strategic places within our community" (Youth Interviewee 9: Munsieville 2). He further indicated that "we have seen flyers that have also been distributed door to door by some young people who got them from Umnotho for Empowerment in particular" (Youth Interviewee 9: Munsieville 2). Umnotho for Empowerment is an NGO with a youth and information centre. The community leader agreed with the youths about the communication strategy of MCLM but added on the argument as follows: *The local newspapers have been playing a huge role in information dissemination. There is a historic relationship which is contractual between MCLM and Krugersdorp News. However, the language, coverage and access continue to be limiting factors for many young people in MCLM* (Key informant 10: Community Leader).

Recommendations for improvement include enhancing social media presence, diversifying communication methods, improving internal coordination, and involving youth in content creation and dissemination. The study advocates for aligning communication strategies with positive youth development theories, emphasizing youth-led media initiatives and participatory platforms to enhance youth engagement in decision-making processes.

Promotion of Active Youth Participation by MCLM

The study also delved into the efforts made by MCLM to foster active youth involvement, extending beyond mere documentation. Encouraging youth participation stands as a pivotal strategy for enhancing their inclusion in decision-making processes. Results revealed that 39% of surveyed youth felt that MCLM did not widely promote youth participation, with an additional 38% considering it only moderately encouraged. Only 8% believed MCLM highly encouraged youth participation. This indicated that the majority (92%) perceived youth involvement as either moderately promoted or not at all. Among the participants who indicated that youth participation was moderately

encouraged, one young person, who identified herself as an achiever, indicated that: *The promotion of youth participation reaches some of us very well. We know each other, and we are always targeted and invited. I agree that there is a large portion of youth that do not get these messages. They are also not informed of what was happening and what will happen next. This is an inner circle issue* (Focus Group 1: Ward 31)

Within this context, narratives from participants underscored the limited reach of youth participation initiatives. Many youths felt uninformed about opportunities for engagement, highlighting a tendency for selective targeting and insufficient dissemination of information. Moreover, findings suggested that current participation mainly centered around receiving information rather than active involvement in decision-making processes. A plea for more substantial engagement was voiced, emphasizing the need for genuine partnership with the youth throughout decision-making processes. The figure below shows the youth participation mechanisms that MCLM uses at grassroots level.

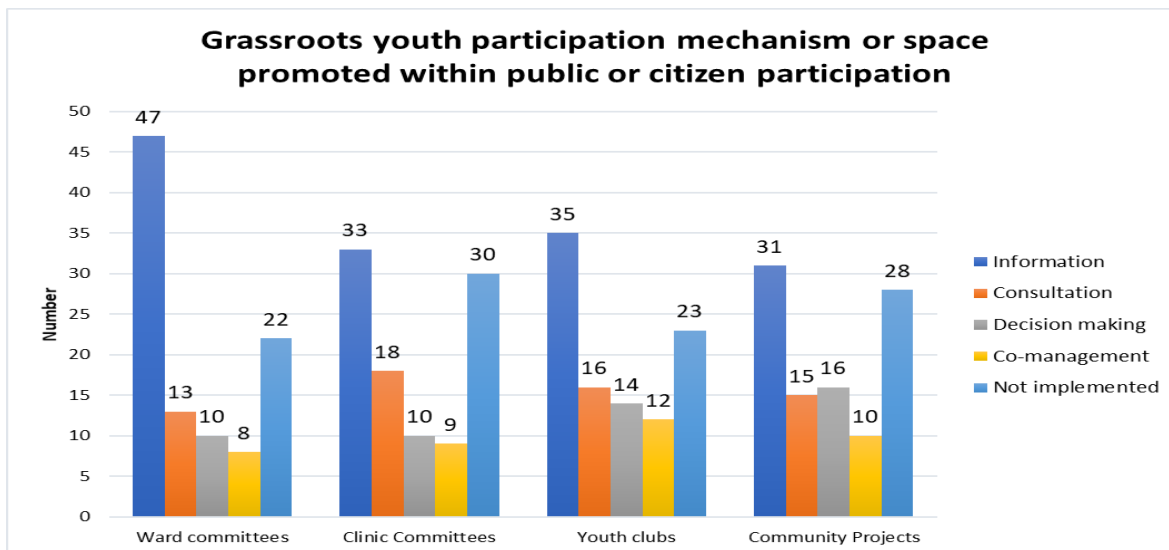


Figure 2: Grassroots youth participation mechanisms.

Source: Fieldwork, 2019.

While various mechanisms exist for youth participation, such as ward committees and youth clubs, most activities primarily facilitate information sharing rather than deeper engagement. Grassroots participation mechanisms like ward committees garnered higher participation rates, albeit predominantly at the information level. However, challenges such as unequal time allocation and lack of holistic support hindered meaningful youth involvement. An NGO representative in the key informant interviews argued that he attends various decision-making platforms and processes in MCLM. He further pointed out that: *In my personal experience of networking and interaction, I see the same faces of young people. Some are very vocal, yet some sit quietly and say nothing the whole time, but they will always be brought in. There is no widespread promotion of youth participation here. MCLM uses the same list of participants to bring the same culprits who will endorse their plans* (Key informant 8: NGO).

In contrast to official perceptions, community feedback highlighted shortcomings in promoting youth participation. While MCLM officials expressed satisfaction with attendance at decision-making meetings, community leaders and NGO representatives emphasized a recurring participation pattern among a select group, indicative of tokenism rather than genuine engagement. The need for MCLM to expand and diversify efforts in promoting youth participation was underscored to ensure equitable opportunities for all young people.

Partisan Space: Youth Participation Along Party Political Lines

The study revealed a significant correlation between political activism and youth participation within MCLM. Politically affiliated youths often leveraged their involvement for future political aspirations, indicating a trend where participation became a pathway to career advancement. However, this politicization of youth engagement risked undermining the transformative potential of participation, fostering exclusionary dynamics, and limiting genuine empowerment. One youth respondent pointed out that: *I participate through my party structures because I see an*

opportunity for me to be included in the list to become a councillor or member of the provincial parliament in the coming elections (Youth Interviewee 20: Rietvallei).

A Mogale City Local Municipality official also confirmed the role of political parties in organising youths for participation as he argued that: *Youths are organised through political structures. Most of them are transported to attend the meetings so that they can push a political agenda. They come with a set agenda which is almost drilled and rehearsed beforehand. For example, in the last IDP, they were demanding youth centres which are an ANC Resolution from their 54th Elective Conference of 2017. They also demanded an Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) Training Centre in Mogale City (Key informant 2: MCLM 2).*

Acknowledgment from MCLM officials and community leaders further highlighted the instrumental role of political parties in organizing youth participation, often aligning with party agendas rather than broader community interests. Such partisan-driven engagement perpetuated an "us versus them" mentality within the youth community, fostering feelings of exclusion among those not politically connected. This partisan approach to youth participation contradicted the principles of positive youth development, which advocate for holistic empowerment regardless of political affiliation. Similarly, it diverged from the community youth development theory's emphasis on responsiveness to youth needs and fostering inclusive dialogue. Genuine youth participation should transcend political divides, prioritizing the collective well-being over partisan interests.

Sectoral Youth Participation

The study also identified a sectoral approach to youth participation within MCLM, where youth engaged as interest groups or affiliations such as arts, NGOs, and churches. While sectoral participation facilitated targeted discussions and submissions of youth-specific issues, it encountered challenges in achieving synergy and integration with broader decision-making processes. Sectoral meetings often devolved into mere platforms for listing demands rather than fostering substantive dialogue or influencing policy. This disconnect between sectoral engagement and decision-making processes underscored the need for a more integrated and collaborative approach to youth participation. Additionally, constraints such as limited timeframes and lack of alignment with planning cycles posed further obstacles to meaningful engagement. During the focus group discussions, one young person highlighted that *"young people participate as a sector. Each ward sends two representatives to this sector meeting annually"* (Youth Interviewee 15: Hekpoort). Further, one of the MCLM official highlighted problems with the sectoral approach: *Youth demands that come from this sectoral meeting are higher than what the municipality can deliver. We cannot put these sectors together therefore we ask them to meet on their own and submit their demands to us then we prioritise them for the five-year or annual plan (Key informant 2: MCLM).*

The sectoral approach to youth participation, while providing avenues for youth expression, fell short of the transformative potential outlined by positive youth development and community youth development theories. Rather than facilitating genuine dialogue and policy influence, sectoral meetings risked becoming superficial exercises in demand articulation. To truly empower youth as active contributors to community development, efforts should focus on fostering inclusive dialogue and integrating youth perspectives into decision-making processes.

Local Human Development Projects

Approximately 40% of youths participated in local economic and social development projects but found them to be short-term and insufficient in addressing their underlying challenges, leaving many unemployed and frustrated. MCLM implements these projects in partnership with district and national entities, and the projects are limited due to funding constraints, often leading to temporary solutions. Projects are viewed as social justice initiatives aimed at assisting disadvantaged youth in entering the job market, albeit temporarily, reflecting a balancing act to alleviate community pressure. One young person indicated that: *"community structures and MCLM deliver to us temporary projects such as street cleaning, building contracts, and food gardens"* (Youth Interviewee 15: Hekpoort). The Local Councillor highlighted that: *The projects that MCLM implements in communities embrace what we call a social justice orientation because they help the disadvantaged youth who do not have any qualifications and experience to enter the formal job market. This is half a loaf, which is better than nothing.* (Key informant 7: Local Council)

The study suggests tailoring initiatives to the specific needs of disadvantaged youth populations, emphasizing the importance of integrating youth voices into project decision-making processes.

Skills Development Initiatives

Skills development initiatives target individual youths with some level of education, experiences, or talents, aiming to address unemployment or underemployment. One young person commented that: *Skills development initiatives that I have been involved in include capacity building workshops, in-service learning, a learnership, and recognition of prior learning assessment. I have found them very helpful for me to find a job or get employed*” (Youth Interviewee 20: Rietvallei)

The NYDA representative argued that as an agency they understood that youth participated in decision-making processes because they were engaged in skills development initiatives essentially through partnerships with other organisations in and outside MCLM. He noted that: *Key among these efforts include skills development programmes that are supported by the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform which targets unemployed rural youth aged between 18–25 who have Grade 12 (Standard 10) as part of the Rural Economic Transformation Strategy. The programme exposes participants to different skill fields which focus on instilling a culture of discipline, patriotism, community service as well as technical and vocational capabilities.* (Key informant 3: District Representative).

Despite benefiting from these initiatives, youths express dissatisfaction with their top-down nature and the lack of involvement in their design and relevance to their aspirations.

Intersectionality of Youth participation

Youth participation is critiqued for its lack of inclusivity, failing to encompass the diversity of backgrounds and experiences among youth populations in MCLM. Participation is seen as polarized between achievers (educated, economically sound) and troublemakers (targeted for reform), excluding a significant portion of youth. Input from one young person was as follows: *Youths who generally participate in the decision-making process are divided into two groups: the achievers who are being prepared for leadership and the troublemakers who are either being appeased or meant to be corrected through this process of participation* (Focus Group 1: Ward 31).

The sentiments of the youth were confirmed by the key informant, who indicated that youth participation should be inclusive primarily because *“solutions to the most pressing issues of youth are found through the interaction and involvement of all young regardless of your level of standing”* (Key informant 3: District Representative).

Following the above, it is evident that there is a large portion of young people who are called the “missing middle” by Nairn, Sligo, and Freeman (2018:79) who do not participate in decision-making processes. Youth should participate as a heterogeneous rather than a homogeneous group.

Monitoring and Evaluation Strategy

Key performance indicators and targets for monitoring and evaluation are primarily determined by MCLM administrative staff without adequate community input, hindering transparency and accountability. One young person from Magaliesburg argued that: *Key performance indicators and targets remain the prerogative of the MCLM administrative staff, who think that as they develop them, they were working on behalf of the community, including the youth* (Youth Interviewee: 1 Magaliesburg)

The key informant from the West Rand District Municipality argued that they saw nothing wrong with this arrangement as *“staff and communities do not have the same competencies and that the documentation could not be done in a mass meeting”* (Key informant 3: District Rep). This means the same officials draft and later finalise the document without any segregation of duties and youth participation for that matter.

From the above, it is evident that monitoring and evaluation strategies on youth participation at MCLM lack explicit youth indicators and targets, leaving the participation of young people unsustainable and reliant on individual officers' discretion.

Overall, the article highlights the need for more inclusive, tailored, and transparent approaches to youth participation in local development initiatives within MCLM, emphasizing the importance of integrating youth voices and addressing the diverse needs of youth populations

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my Ph.D. supervisor, Prof Philani Moyo, for his encouragement and guidance. I am grateful to my wife Soneni, my daughter Rejoice and my sister-in-law Silindile for their moral support. I would like to thank Prof Lulu Shokane and Prof Joyce M Mdiniso for believing in me and giving me a chance at the University of Zululand.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Shekinah Mayibongwe Maphosa, my son who died in June 2022 from mental health complications. He was one of my Research Assistants.

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