



## Youth participation in electoral processes

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### Abstract

*The study was carried out to provide an understanding of the participation of the Municipality's youth in the local electoral processes. The objective of the study measured and examined the extent of youth participation in the local electoral processes of the Municipality, investigated and identified factors that prevent the youth from participating in electoral processes within the Municipality. The study applied a qualitative research methodology with questionnaires and interviews used to collect data. A number of factors were found as posing challenges to the youth and had hindered their participation in electoral processes. These challenges emanated from negative attitudes of the youth towards politics. Also, employment/income, age, gender and race were some salient factors backed by poor education background, poverty and unemployment. The study recommends that the youth in the Municipality should be socially and politically well-informed by their parents, teachers, church elders and the Mafikeng community to enable them acquire skills and positive attitudes towards participating in the local electoral processes.*

**Keywords:** Youth participation, community projects, electoral processes, community development, Mafikeng local municipality.

### Introduction

Political participation by the masses of any given society has come to be globally accepted as a fundamental attribute of democracy, as government cannot be said to be representing the people if they are not involved in choosing it. Throughout the world, governments have placed emphasis on efforts to engage different sections of their populace in the electoral processes, at various levels (national and sub-national). Thus, participation has become a buzz word in the politics of representation. Participation like other concepts in social sciences have been open to varying definitions by scholars. Concept of participation can be referred to as "those legal activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take"<sup>1</sup>. This will be elaborated later.

Youth participation in the political process, especially in the electoral processes has been encouraged by the United Nations which considers youth participation in electoral processes as the embodiment of hope and aspiration of nations. Youth local participation provides them with experience and opportunities for their future wider and full participation in the municipal, provincial and national governments. Consequently, since the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, governments across the world have been laying emphasis on youth political participation particularly in South Africa's Local Municipalities.

In South Africa, Local Municipalities (LMs) are classified into three categories<sup>2</sup>. Category A is a Municipality that has exclusive executive and legislative authority in its area. Category B is a Municipality that shares municipal executive

and legislative authority in its area with a category C Municipality within whose area it falls and Category C is a Municipality that has municipal executive and legislative authority in an area that includes more than one Municipality. Based on the categories of the Municipalities, Mafikeng Local Municipality falls under category B of the Act<sup>3</sup>.

Youth participation in Mafikeng's municipal electoral processes or in any municipality is an essential aspect of the voting processes of that municipality. Participation provides basic platform to the understanding of youth role in the municipal electoral process, governance, decision-making and in community projects. More importantly, youth participation in the electoral processes of the municipality, enables them to get involved in the processes of electing the leadership of the municipality and to hold the leaders accountable for any ills in the municipality.

### Literature Review

**Defining youth and their classifications:** Who are the youth and how are they classified? The definition of the youth varies from country to country and society to society. The term "youth" is referred to the state or period of change from dependence in childhood to adulthood independence. It could also be referred to as a flexible period or progression from childhood to adulthood. This progression or transition if applied to age limit, varies from country to country and from region to region. In most countries and regions of the world, the number of youths who fall into secondary youth has over the years widened the unemployment gap increasing social and economic cost to the local and national economies of these countries or

regions. This is why the UN has carefully defined the youth considering the statistical and consistency implications amongst the member states for those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. Within these are *teenagers* between 13 and 19 years of ages; and *young adults* as between 20 to 24 years of age.

From the definitions youth classifications can be narrowed to two, that is, primary and secondary youth. According to NYDA, *Primary youth* are those young men and women within the age group of 18 years to 35 years<sup>4</sup>. They extend the age limit to 35 years differing from the World body, UN's limit of 24. This group of youth are seen as youth in the age of majority. They can enter into a business contract independently without the requirement for parental, guardian or representative consent. *Secondary youth* are those young men and women within the age group of 14 years to 17 years<sup>4</sup>. This group of youth are seen as youth in the age of minority. They can enter into a business contract only with the support and consent of parents, guardian or representatives.

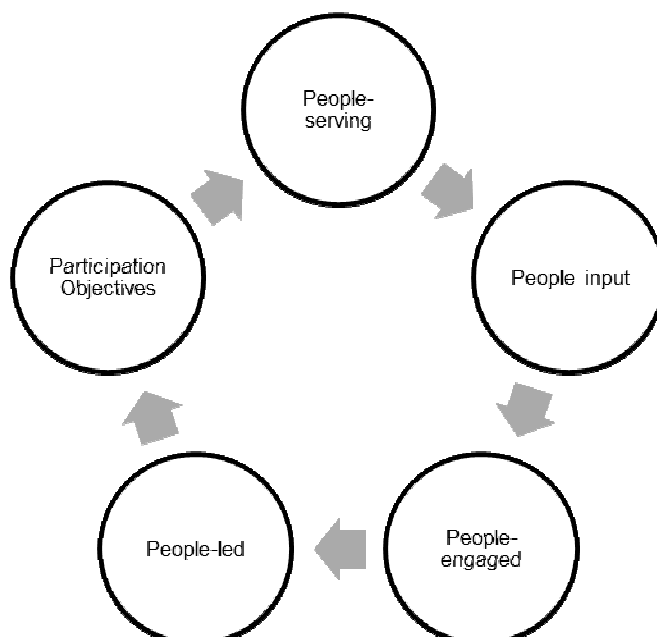
**Concept of participation:** Participation means taking active part in any development or community activity that affects one's life. A member of a community participates in a development action in various forms and at different levels. One can participate at the decision-making level or the implementation level, monitoring, evaluation to share of benefit levels. Participation at any of these levels brings about efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of development. This may explain why participation is crucial in identifying who does what, when and how in the development or community projects.

The term participation is referred to by philosopher and critical theorists, Paolo Friere, as the transformation of social structure<sup>5</sup>. In other words, participation is a process of involving people in the development activities and decisions that affect their lives<sup>6</sup>. A definition that emphasizes the contribution to policy formulation and the outcome of policy implementation states that, "Political participation consists of taking part in the process of formulation, passage and implementation of public policies"<sup>7,8</sup>. Conventional definition of political participation states that "political participation refers to those actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or to support government and politics."<sup>9</sup> This definition covers both conventional and non-conventional forms of participation<sup>9</sup>. Conventional political participation includes the routine behavior that uses institutional channels of representative government, especially, campaigning for candidates and voting in elections. Unconventional political participation on the other hand includes all forms of uncommon behaviour that either challenge or defy the established government channels or accepted culture<sup>10,11</sup>.

The essence of political participation in any society, either civilized or primitive, is to seek control of power, acquisition of power and dispensing of power to organize society, harness and distribute resources and to influence decision making in line with organized or individual interests<sup>12</sup>. In the new South

Africa, participation must not merely become a legitimization process but should be voluntary, passive and willingly<sup>14</sup>. It should be an essential component of a broad political programme in which local knowledge becomes a driving force for social transformation. According to the Trillium Foundation, traditional participation provides opportunities for the people to take initiatives and responsibility<sup>15</sup>. In the case of participation in electoral processes, it would enable them to exercise their rights as citizens and access to democratic processes in the society<sup>16</sup>.

The traditional participation has value, but the determining factors are mainly the degree to which people are engaged in the program and the degree to which the government programmes, policies and infrastructures support people involvement in a meaningful way. Studies has found that certain government programmes offer opportunity for people to develop leadership skills needed to become self-confident<sup>6,17</sup>. One way of promoting these programmes is through effective communication with the citizenry.



**Figure-1:** Traditional Participation.

Figure-1, showcases the chain relationship of each traditional stage of participation. Once any stage in the chain is violated the whole participation exercise will no longer represent the interest of the people which form the centre of any development plans if the community is considered the beneficiaries of the project. From the diagram: i. Stage one represents the people's initiative, ideas and knowledge while serving in the community projects for the benefit of the community. ii. At stage two, these ideas and initiatives of the people become a significant input in the project. The people's input are evaluated and feedbacks on the progress of the project are analysed. iii. On stage three, based on the people's assessment of the project, they become fully-involved; their participation in the community project at this

stage is unequivocal. iv. Having won the heart of the evaluators, at stage four the community project becomes the people-led. The program's concepts therefore become part and parcel of the people. v. Participation Objectives to make community projects people oriented is therefore answered when the sequence of the chain relationship is harnessed, developed and addressed in-line with questions on the participation objectives, outcomes, and assessment criteria.

Objectives and strategies of traditional participation must lead to the development of all members of society through a bottom-up approach<sup>6</sup>. If participation is seen as a top-down research methodology then it will explain the community's attitude to how they do or do not participate in community projects and why. Arguably, literature exploring community participation can be relatively viewed as either disengaging and disenfranchised on one extreme, or active and engaged in new forms of politics<sup>18</sup>. Other studies have found that people's participation extend no further than voting in the case of electoral processes<sup>19</sup>. They also found that education, wealth, age and voluntary association membership are the most important determinants of level of participation in community development programmes.

Conventional literature tends to overlook circumstances and issues that affect people and the way they view community development programmes. For example, considering participation in various electoral processes like voting, party membership, joining local youth councils, campaigning and taking part in demonstrations, the failure of the mainstream literature to attempt to differentiate young people from adults, means they have tended to overlook the generational effects. By generational effects, we mean the distinctive attitudes that are developed by the people and shared by this group over-time. Arguably, generational effects could be traced to the fact that successive generations face new and different challenges of which previous generations have no experience about<sup>20</sup>.

Potential decline in the level of political and civic participation may be due to the decreasing relevance of political activities to the people<sup>21</sup>. People who do not vote or participate in politics do so because they do not see the relevance neither does it make any difference to them<sup>21</sup>. Disputing this claim, there is the belief that political indifference clears better understanding, as it shows the essential relationship between free choice and representative satisfaction derived by the personal indifferences<sup>22</sup>. Furthermore, non-participation is a condition under which one suffers- apathy.

**Non-participation:** Non-participation is the absence of participation. It is defined as a state of mind brought about by forces, structures, institutions or elite manipulations over which one has little control and perhaps little knowledge<sup>22</sup>. People are indeed turning away from formal mainstream politics but this does not mean that they are necessarily politically apathetic<sup>23</sup>. Indifference in participation is traceable to the failure of

politicians, parties and political structures to address the issues that concern the people. In other words, people place high degree of faith in the democratic processes and few support the view that voting is a waste of time. That is why people conceptualise politics in a limited and narrow way, perceived as boring and irrelevant to their lives<sup>24</sup>. This explains why few people vote, given the total absence of real political choice.

**Classifications of political participation:** Almond, Powell, Strom and Dalton provide a classification of political participation based on the political culture of given societies<sup>25</sup>. To them, there are three major political cultures which describe citizens' participation in political process: participant, subject and parochial.

**Participatory culture:** Participatory culture motivates people to keep the participation doors open. Participatory culture teaches people skills and promotes political emancipation. This is because participatory culture generally exposes people to political information and ideas<sup>26</sup>. It promotes the key democratic values of involvement and openness. It teaches people vital elements of involving, acquisition of knowledge and collaborative problem-solving. Participatory culture furthermore provides both motives and opportunities for political engagement<sup>27</sup>.

A resolution from Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHGM) argues that participatory culture is critical for maintaining democratic values such as freedom and justice<sup>28</sup>. Participatory culture depends on two ideas about participation, that is, as a paid employment and managing the transition from adolescent student to adult worker, while the other is the democratic practices embedded in devices like youth roundtables or similar consultative mechanisms<sup>28</sup>. Roundtable discussions create opportunity for people to communicate directly with government on issues of concern to them. For instance, in Australia, the Australian government established a taskforce team to examine people's transition from school to work and further their education as well as actively participating in the activities of community life<sup>29</sup>.

As can be deduced from the above, paid employment is a steady transition from education to the workforce<sup>29</sup>. For instance, in Australia, Government increased bid for educational retention rate and reforms such as work-for-the dole. Paid work was seen as serving two traditional roles- to provide and serve as a source of income and productivity as well as a moral-social integrative influence in the lives of people to actively get involved in the participatory culture<sup>29</sup>. In essence, people with higher levels of socio-economic resources are most likely to participate in electoral processes while the almost inactive have the lowest levels of socio-economic resources<sup>24</sup>.

**Types of participation – Active and Passive participations:** Broad based meaning of participation is not only measured by its scope such as the number of people who attend a number of

activities but also by its quality such as how participants have real effect on the process to influence a particular decision or produce a favourable outcome. That is why measurement of participation is not necessarily whether the effort is youth-led, adult-led or intergenerational but rather whether people's actions have some effect<sup>30</sup>. By this they are involved in goal setting, resource allocation and program implementation<sup>31</sup>. Organizing brings people together and enables them to generate power to accomplish their purpose<sup>31</sup>. It is a process that builds their own sense of power, their perceived or actual power with others, and their ability to affect power relationships in the community.

There are three different concepts in his classification of levels of political participation; very active level, occasionally active and inactive<sup>32</sup>. Participants at the very active level would refer to leaders who hold high positions in legislative and administrative spheres. They are concerned with the exercise of formal political power and are seen as the repositories of power. Principally, persons in this category belong to political parties and other organizations through which members of society may participate in one form of political activity or another, such as interest groups.

At the occasionally active level would be individuals who take part in political activities when certain issues that concern them either socially or economically are affected. People who only vote at scheduled general elections every four years would be categorized under this group, as voting is regarded as the commonest form of political participation. Active participation in the present context would be seen as getting a group of people or when the people take initiative in the governance, decision-making and other community programmes. This is usually the case when a greater number of people participate in the community project without being forced. It is also when the majority of the people freely and willingly take part in community action to make any change that benefits the community.

Passive participation is non-active participation. Inactive level of political participation is where people are either not involved in political activity at all or show signs of limited involvement<sup>32</sup>. This is the kind of participation that defines people's non-involvement through visible or physical appearance and reaction to events within the municipality or the community. Passive participation is most times based on participation by rules and regulations. It ensures that people participate according to the laws or regulations rather than willful and free-will involvement and participation in the community projects. It considers the accessibility, interest and ability of people in the municipality, villages and communities, the rural and the municipality at large to respond to municipal development plans, programmes, governance, economic and socio-political initiatives.

In a radical development theory dimension, Active participation concerns itself with a greater majority of the community

members participating in a development or political activity. Passive participation on the other hand encompasses the minority seen involved in a participatory community action.

**Reasons for participation:** There are various reasons why young people should participate in the municipal electoral processes. This motive could be for personal reasons or for community obligations. Both personal and community participations should follow a bottom-up approaches<sup>6</sup>. Amongst these reasons include voting for a credible candidate that would represent their interest at Municipal level and in decision-makings that concern young people.

Participation as a bottom-up approach ensures that the rural and urban communities are integrated in the decision making on projects and development plans in their municipalities. Thus Participation should be people oriented<sup>6</sup> involving them in the processes of planning, decision-making, implementation, evaluation and monitoring of development programmes and projects. The people should see local community and municipal projects as "our project" and not "their project". If this is achieved, efficient managing, monitoring and evaluation would lead to effective sustenance of such projects. Therefore, it is of paramount that people in communities should be encouraged to see elections as decision-making period to determine who leads or direct the affairs of their municipalities. By participating in the electoral processes, governance of the municipality and other activities, they will take responsibility for the outcomes of their choice of representatives at the municipality.

**Who should participate and why:** Every member of the municipality and the community is entitled to participate in community development programmes in any capacity according to his/her capability. Participation assumes that people are competent and self-actuated citizens, rather than passive recipients of services. This assumption is consistent with the view that people are resourceful rather than the classification of a group of people as victims of poverty and constituting problems for the society<sup>33</sup>. It is therefore paramount to understand who and why the people are motivated to participate in community development programmes and municipal activities. In Social Science studies some people are alienated from participating in community activities, and are considered weak and deficient. Adults also view young people as troubled and troubling, and these perceptions weaken rather than strengthen the roles of young people<sup>33</sup>.

Most active participants in community and municipal programmes are not representatives of the general community. due to income, education, class and socio-economic status and alienation. On the other hand, non-participation by those who may be of the middle and upper-income group, could be attributed to the individual demand on them by technology, telecommunications, workload and decline in social capital<sup>34</sup>. Resultant effect of this is their withdrawal from and disengagement in democratic activities within communities. The

most active participants are the rural people who may belong to the low income group, with little education and of low socio-economic status. They actively participate because they hope it would replace rural life of dependence with empowered, self-reliant sustainable life. By participating, they hope it will also help them identify their needs and priorities and, in the process, develop plans to achieve them instead of relying on outsider for assistance which never comes.

Through increasing participation, low-income people and young adults are integrated in governance, community projects and educational reforms; including initiatives to the abolition of inequities in school draconic suspension policies that prevent them from making their voices heard in school programmes<sup>15,35</sup>. Differential participation by the youth and low-income people does not mean that they are disengaged from democracy but they participate in public affairs in the activities which are more appropriate to their situation.

**Challenges to participation:** The Mafikeng Local Municipality is surrounded by 103 villages scattered around the municipality. The challenge is how to determine the parameters through which people from these villages would get fair and equitable involvement in the decision-making, governance and other community development programmes considering economic cost and socio-political implications. The challenge, as in most cases, is that one village could be seen as marginalised while another village may be perceived as favoured in terms of executing community projects and getting elected Municipal representative. Therefore, the difficulty in getting people involved in the participatory processes lies in the ability to change their mentality from a group that cannot create change, to a group that have ideas that are resourceful for implementation<sup>36</sup>. Educating people in the scattered villages of the municipality, pose a challenge since the educated few prefer to migrate to urban areas. Besides this, villages and communities lack access to resources such as community policing, clean water electricity and good roads.

**Youth in electoral processes:** In South Africa, as alluded to earlier, youth participation in the local electoral processes is an important aspect of democracy which is constantly being promoted by the government. It is therefore of particular importance that opportunities are created for the youth to participate in activities at local Municipalities. The Draft National Policy Framework (DNPF) for public participation published in November 2005, defines the concept of participation as an open, accountable process through which individuals and groups within selected communities can exchange views and influence decision-making. It is also viewed as a democratic process of engaging people to decide, plan and play active part in the development and operation of services that affect the youth at the local Municipalities.

It is more likely that the youth will stay in their home locations if they have sufficient opportunities for self-realisation<sup>38</sup>. In order to guarantee youth participation in the electoral processes

in decision-making, such processes at all levels, must be youth centered. African National Congress (ANC) commitment to youth participation in the electoral processes and policy-making started before 1994. The ANC has since then made other remarkable contributions to the nation by getting the youth involved in electoral processes and governance of LM<sup>38</sup>.

## Methodology

The study applied a qualitative research methodology. In this methodology, 200 youths from the municipality were conveniently sampled and interviewed using open-ended questionnaires. The choice of the sampling method is due to the nature of the study. The open-ended questionnaires enabled the respondents to respond beyond the boundaries of the questions posed to them. Some Interviews were carried out through interactive group discussions. Each group constituted 10 members. During the group discussions, various questions including why the youth are not interested in electoral processes of the municipality were posed to the respondents (the youths). Each group had different opinions but one thing that stood outstanding, was "youth attitude" that needed to change. The study found that the Youth Councils were very inactive in coordinating youth activities and were not organizing them to participate in political processes nor bringing political awareness to the majority of the youth in the area studied, Mafikeng.

The implication of the result of this study is that the Youth Council is supposed to be the medium through which the youth are mainstreamed to participate in the local electoral processes. The goals of the council should be properly articulated to enable the youth to have a say in the resolutions made by the Local Municipal Council. Nonetheless, the youth participation in local electoral processes enhances their understanding about electioneering and making good choices and to freely express their civil rights during voting exercises. In the Local Municipality, the paradox of the youth participation in the electoral processes is resolved in a tautological manner by simply assuming that individuals get utility out of participating in the political electoral processes<sup>40</sup>. This explains the view that considering time, money, resources and energy that are devoted in campaigns before and after local elections, it is important to educate the youth on the issues of electoral processes. This can be done through the local youth councils, the IEC, schools, the media, families and churches about their civil and political responsibilities. That can easily be done through formulated youth policies at the Youth Councils.

## Results and discussion

Firstly, the study found that there are legislation(s), policies and programmes like the National Youth Policy documents in South Africa that aim at youth development. However, these policy documents are flawed in several ways since they are not grassroots based. Even though these legislations and documents provide an understanding into government plans and desires for

the youth; the legislation extends beyond the youth since civil responsibilities are not meant for the youth alone but the entire citizens of 18 years and above. As such, the provision of these several legislative documents and policy frameworks by the South African government should be modelled to reach the most vulnerable at the rural communities and to the youth in schools. Arguably, the aim and objectives for the publication of these policy documents include explaining to South African citizens and the world on steps taken by the South African government to integrate young people into government programmes. At MLM additional programmes such as Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), Community Works Programme (CWP) and car-wash scheme are provided as a medium to employ the youth and to get them actively involved in governance. These additional programmes are aimed at equipping the youth with skill and employment. The problem thereof is that these programmes are not properly implemented and not evenly distributed within the municipality.

Secondly, the Local Youth Council did not serve much purpose during the elections since it was not the medium through which the youth participated in the local electoral processes. The LYC, consequently was not consistent with the welfare of the youth during the election. The body was hijacked by few members, and those who are not members of the ruling political party were left out. The negligence constituted a challenge to getting the entire youth with voter's card and who are qualified to vote to abstain from the electoral processes since their welfare through the LYC had been left in the hands of few. Therefore, the poor integration of the youth to be actively involved in the local governance and electoral processes through the LYC negatively affected the rate of participation in the electoral processes (in which case, one could then ask what is the relevance of the LYC since it cannot promote youth participation in the elections of the local municipality). Factors such as gender, years of political affiliation and experience, voting age and financial capabilities before and during elections constituted major challenges amongst the youth. Those mostly disenfranchised were the secondary youth, the youths in the interior villages and those without proper education.

Knowledge based curriculum contributed to the gap in the views expressed by the youth. The concept of participation (to some) sounds abstract since they are not core members of a political party. The study further found that this gap is a challenge to the rural community. Since they are not core members of political party, their participation is minimal and failures of the government on service delivery are visited with anger, rage and destructive activities. Therefore, the study recommends that the youth should be integrated into governance and civil activities by the Youth Councils by developing their minds through education and awareness campaigns at tender ages. It is also recommended that the provision of several legislative documents and policy frameworks by the South African government should be modelled to reach the most vulnerable at the rural communities and the youth in schools.

## Conclusion

This paper examined the level of Youth participation in the electoral processes in Mafikeng Local Municipality (MLM) in the North-West Province of South Africa and found that youth participation in the political exercises is very low. This can be linked to the fact that the Local Youth Council has not been able to play its statutory role of being the platform through which the youth in the municipality play active role in the political process because of the non-acceptability by the youths. The uneven distribution and ineffective implementation of the programmes that are meant to empower the youths and provide them with the leverage they need to participate, has affected their acceptability levels. Youth participation in electoral processes provides them with experience and opportunities for their future participation in the municipal, provincial and national government. It enables them to get involved in the processes of electing the leadership of the municipality and to hold the leaders accountable for any ills in the municipality as well as the community development. Participation at any of the levels brings about efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of the development process.

There is a need for greater enlightenment of the youth to buy-into the programmes that have been put in place to encourage their participation in the electoral processes, especially the Local Youth Council. Youths should also be encouraged to take advantage of the various empowerment programmes that have been put in place by the South African government.

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