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Exploring community participation in water provision: Insights from South Africa

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Abstract
Public participation in water governance has been shown to play a significant role in improving service delivery; however, in many cases, it remains superficial and does not lead to meaningful change. The paper assesses community participation in water provision in Tjakastad, South Africa, using a qualitative exploratory design. Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, which categorizes citizen involvement into non-participation, tokenism, and citizen power, was used to assess the level and quality of community participation. Data were collected from 16 community members via in-depth interviews and analyzed through thematic analysis using Atlas.ti software. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The findings reveal that community participation in water provision in Tjakastad was largely tokenistic, with most residents informed or consulted but not actively involved in decision-making. This limited involvement led to frustration and disengagement from residents. The paper recommends enhancing communication, addressing political and financial barriers (such as access to resources or political interference), and ensuring communities have real decision-making power. This paper contributes to the limited body of research on rural community participation in water governance in South Africa, particularly by examining the impact of tokenistic participation and offering new insights on service delivery outcomes.

Keywords: Community participation, tokenistic participation, service delivery, water governance

Introduction

Access to clean, safe, and reliable water is one of humanity's major challenges. Globally, approximately 2.2 billion people, primarily residing in rural areas of developing nations, lack access to safe drinking water (UN, 2020). This situation is equally appalling in South Africa, where several communities continue to face water insecurity despite efforts to ensure that everyone has access to water. For instance, most households within Chief Albert Luthuli Municipality still do not have regular water supplies, despite a constitutional provision that guarantees an adequate supply of water as a right, which obligates the government to ensure its realization through reasonable steps to make this right a reality (Section 27 of the South African Constitution). Furthermore, the Water Services Act and the National

Water Act guide local authorities in providing sufficient water services; however, most citizens still lack consistent access to water.

Good governance requires effective participation in decision-making. Communities are made to participate in ways that do not involve influencing the decisions. Such has been well differentiated by Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, which distinguishes between tokenistic and real citizen power, i.e., whether people are merely informed about what is being decided or consulted. However, the consultation does not influence the decision. Existing literature from Africa and Asia confirms that when participation is superficial, projects often fail; however, genuine involvement leads to better accountability and more lasting solutions (Ara et al., 2024, Boakye & Akpor, 2012, Hutchings, 2018). The lack of genuine participation in water governance in South Africa has left the community frustrated, often manifesting in protests against poor service delivery.

On the other hand, where participation is minimal and goes through the motions, it tends to worsen existing inequalities. Marginalized groups such as women, youth, and low-income households are remaining outside decision-making processes, and as a result, they are kept at a disadvantage (Latupeirisa, 2025; Jaravania et al., 2016; Ngoja, 2015). Although the importance of participation in water governance is widely acknowledged, very little research, if any, has examined how rural communities participate in water provision projects. To address this gap, we examined the experience of rural households participating in water provision in Tjakastad, Mpumalanga, South Africa. We used Arnstein's ladder of participation as a framework to examine whether real decision-making power lies with communities through public participation or whether it is merely another form of pseudo-participation. The novelty of the study lies in its focus on the practical implications of participation for marginalized groups. The findings underscore the importance of policymakers ensuring genuine participation that empowers communities and ensuring that water governance addresses existing inequalities.

Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following research objectives:

1. To assesses community participation in water provision in Tjakastad, South Africa, and to explore how tokenistic participation affects service delivery outcomes.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Participation

The concept of "participation" emerged from the growing call for the inclusion of people directly affected by development decisions and processes. Hamdi (1995) referred to participation as a collective process in which professionals, community members, government officials, families, and other stakeholders work together in formal or informal partnerships to meet identified needs or resolve identified challenges. In this process, all participants share the responsibilities, benefits, and risks associated with their collective decisions. While participation in development activities does not guarantee success, non-participation inevitably leads to failure (Blair, 1981). Often, the emphasis is on the quantity of participation rather than its quality, with people expected to make a list of their desires and actively work to fulfill them. Blair (1981) suggested that participation should be perceived as policy (an end in itself); communication (transmission of information and knowledge); conflict resolution (assumption that conflict can be reduced if more people, with varying ideas and information, work together, leading to constructive problem solving); as a means of therapy (meaning citizens take conducive and effective actions to solve problems and meet their needs); and as a strategy (way to achieve goals). Mugari et al., (2025) and Schilderman (2010) argue that the achievements of a participatory process depend on the initiator of the process, whether the community or other stakeholders such as the public or private/business sectors. However, to fully understand the concept,

one needs to grasp the approach and theories guiding participation in development, including experiences from participatory development projects at local, regional, and global levels.

Historically, in countries such as Western Europe, traditional administration practiced participation as a one-way approach (Granier & Kudo, 2016). In this context, citizens played a passive role, with little to no involvement in the processes that inform the administration and governance. However, after the Second World War, significant changes occurred in how nations were administered. Granier and Kudo (2016) note that the traditional approach shifted to a two-way approach, in which citizens were actively involved in decision-making and the management of certain structures and policies within the economy. Public participation, in this context, became a powerful tool that enhances the legitimacy of government processes, improves service delivery, and fosters social inclusion (Chado & Johar, 2016; Kgobe et al., 2025). In nations such as Japan, the traditional system transformed, with public participation gaining prominence under the New Public Governance (NPG). Granier and Kudo (2016) explain that the principles of NPG emphasize cooperation in the commissioning and co-delivery of basic services. Under NPG, community members are not only seen as recipients of public goods but also recognized as key stakeholders in ensuring effective service delivery and the efficient management of essential services, such as water and electricity.

Although there has been extensive research on participatory processes and their historical evolution, there remains a significant lacuna in understanding the mechanisms by which participation is implemented across different cultural, political, and economic settings. To bridge this lacuna, we examined the experiences of rural households participating in water provision in Tjakastad. We used the Arnstein ladder as a framework to assess how the residents' roles represented real influence or merely token consultation.

Perceptions of Community Members About Participation in Water Provision

Ngoja (2015) describes perceptions as the mental awareness and interpretations of patterns captured and processed by the mind. In this regard, perceptions and views of rural community members are examined based on their participation or lack of participation in water provision. Understanding communists' perceptions of participation is important for identifying the underlying factors that influence their involvement in water provision projects. According to Jamadar (2015), many household members view participation in water provision as a means municipality can use to identify their water needs. Active participation, therefore, empowers communities to identify their water-related challenges and collaborate to find suitable solutions.

Jaravania et al., (2016) highlight that different communities in rural areas are actively identifying the water issues the government should address. The authors provided an example using Aboriginal people residing in rural areas of Australia to show how they have been actively identifying their water needs. The Aboriginal people revealed that water is perceived not only as a physical necessity but also as integral to cultural, spiritual, and emotional well-being (Jaravania et al., 2016).

Despite such instances of engagement, global studies reveal persistently low levels of community participation in water supply projects (Granier & Kudo, 2016, Chukwuma, 2016, Helao & Naidoo, 2016, Nomdo et al., 2016). Communities shared the perception that their lack of participation in water provision is due to the failure to understand their roles and means to participate in projects (Tigabu et al., 2013). A case in point is the Catchment-Based Approach implemented in the United Kingdom under the Water Framework Directive. It aimed to promote community participation in the management and protection of catchment areas (Reed & Buckmaster, 2015).

The initiative involved 98 catchments across England. However, it met with limited success because the communities did not fully understand their roles and responsibilities in protecting water resources. Community education is an integral part of any successful initiative to provide water (Coetzee et al., 2016). Put differently, adequate education upfront can remove misunderstandings and

clearly define a community's role and responsibilities in participation. Besides, attitudes and perceptions about taking part in the provision of water are determined by socioeconomic factors, including income, education, and class, which either facilitate or impede meaningful participation in water supply (Tigabua et al., 2013). According to Reed and Buckmaster (2015), who conducted their study in Australia, other social factors, which include gender, age groupings, and religion, together with economic variables, particularly employment and wealth, also influence environmentally related perceptions and activities. Though the existing literature underscores the role of community perceptions and socioeconomic factors in determining their participation in water provision, it has some gaps. There is scanty context-specific information on the influence of local cultural, institutional, and environmental factors on the formation of perceptions in rural communities. The perception-outcome relationship is another gap. While perception has been identified as an important determinant of participation, the causal relationship between positive or negative perceptions and success in water provision projects remains inadequately addressed.

Theoretical Framework: Arnstein's Ladder of Participation

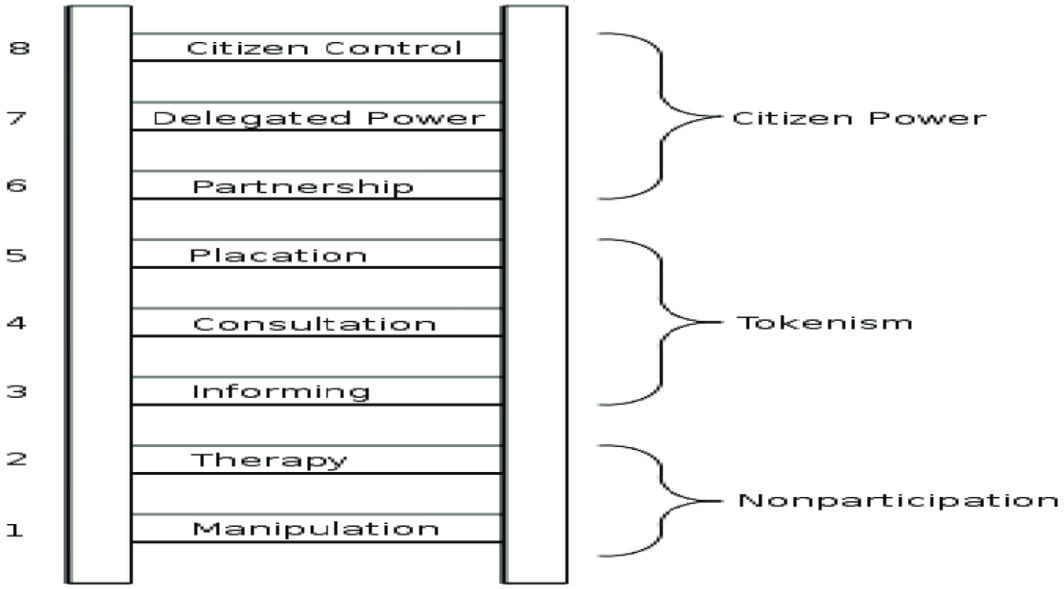
Arnstein's Ladder of Participation is applied as a theoretical framework in this paper to review community participation in providing water in rural areas of South Africa. The primary purpose of this framework is to assess the extent to which the community participates in the process, particularly in achieving an adequate water supply. The model designed by Arnstein (1969) comprises eight rungs, grouped into three broad levels: *no participation*, *tokenism*, and *citizen power*. The lowest rungs-'manipulation' and 'therapy'- are modes of nonparticipation whereby citizens are only informed about decisions with no actual decision-making power; out of these levels, tokenism consists of informing, consulting, and placation where an input from the community has less authority to change decisions; citizen power contains partnership,' delegated power', and 'citizen control' categories where citizens share actual decision-making authority that directly involves them in consequences related to projects (Arnstein, 1969). This framework helps to assess whether rural South African communities have real or symbolic decision-making power. This paper, therefore, applies this framework to assess community participation in water provision projects in Tjakastad, South Africa. It assesses whether the rural community is genuinely involved in decision-making related to the water supply or merely consulted tokenistically.

Kotus and Sowada (2017) have shown that many community participation efforts, particularly in developing countries, often fall into tokenism, in which citizens are consulted. Still, their input does not lead to significant change. What makes Arnstein's ladder stand out from other frameworks on water security is its emphasis on the quality of participation, rather than its mere existence. On the other hand, some frameworks, such as Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM), highlight the importance of including all stakeholders, especially marginalized groups, in the water management process (Grey & Sadoff, 2007). Yet, despite this, IWRM often falls short in ensuring that these groups are meaningfully involved in decision-making. The participation can therefore be analyzed through Arnstein's ladder, which distinguishes between real influence and mere engagement; i.e., a diagnostic tool to distinguish between tokenism and actual involvement. Thus applied here to analyze power relations with local officials and rural inhabitants in an actual sense, concerning decisions about the provision of water. It identifies obstacles to genuine participation and what must be done beyond tokenism to achieve genuine citizens' empowerment in water governance. Knowledge of a community's position on Arnstein's ladder would improve future efforts to empower citizens and increase participation in water projects.

The theoretical framework for the study was anchored in Arnstein's Ladder provided in figure 1:

Figure 1:

Arnstein's Ladder



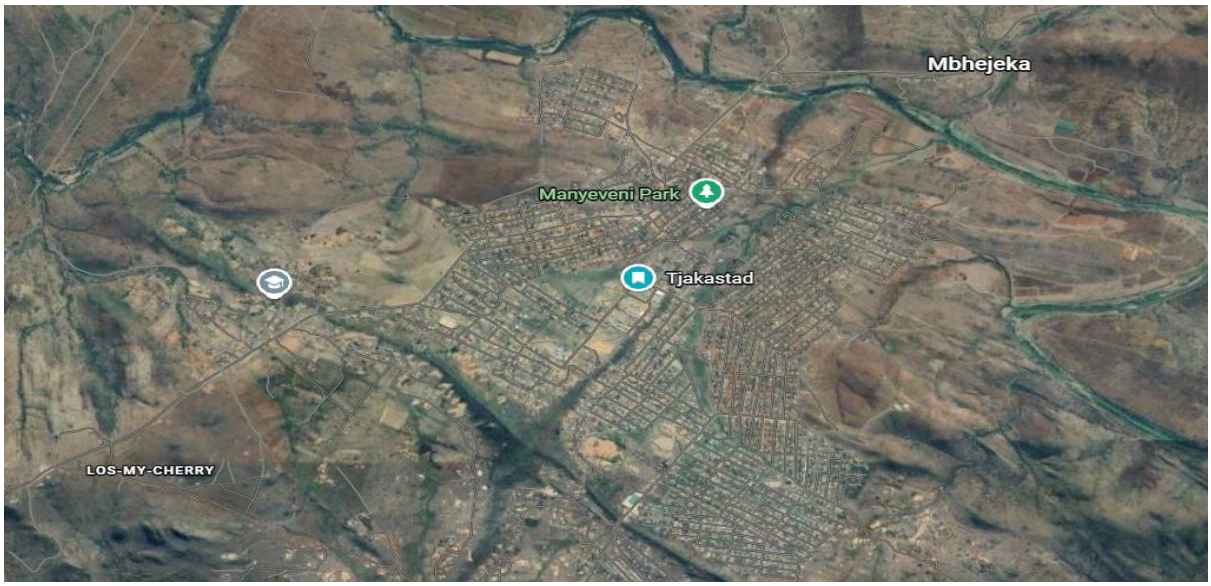
Source: Arnstein, 1969

Methods

Study area

Figure 2:

Tjakastad Village in Mpumalanga Province



Source: MapCarta. (n.d).

The study was conducted in Tjakastad, Ward 18. Tjakstad, located in Chief Albert in Mpumalanga, South Africa, is a rural community that relies heavily on local water sources for domestic

and agricultural use. The Municipality falls under the Gert Sibande District Municipality and is a Category B municipality located on the eastern escarpment of the province (Nkosi, 2017). The Chief Albert Luthuli Municipality has a population of 187,630 people with 53,480 households (IDP, 2020-2021). Tjakastad, under Chief Luthuli LM, has been facing issues such as a lack of basic services, including water, roads, electricity, sanitation, and job opportunities (IDP 2019-2020). The area has a small population of 9515 people and approximately 2,200 households (IDP 2019-2020). The study was conducted in two sections, namely Emahlabathini and Emabovini, out of eleven sections that make up the area. The two areas were chosen, taking into account ease of access to the required data and the financial constraints experienced by the researcher. The area is predominantly Black African, with 98% of the population, followed by 2% White, with a few households belonging to the Asian population.

With reference to water security, most households in the Chief Luthili LM are water-insecure, lacking access to clean water (IDP 2018-2019). Furthermore, 39,016 households have access to water schemes such as piped water in and out of the dwelling units. About 38% of households use pit latrines with ventilation (VIP), 21% use the waterborne system, more than 20% use the bucket system, and others use self-constructed facilities (IDP 2020-2021).

Research Design

This study used an exploratory research design, which is typically used when limited information is available about the variables being studied (Ponelis, 2015). The exploratory research design was chosen because it enabled the researcher to establish theoretical foundations and frameworks that inform the study. According to Ponelis (2015) and Reiter (2017), an exploratory study enables the identification of the motives that shape the research questions and objectives. The design allowed the researcher to focus on the research process aimed at achieving a better understanding of the nature and extent of rural households' participation in water provision. The design made provision for the research to explore and gain familiarity with participatory processes in water provision. The aim was to gain insight into the effects of participation on household water security, not to conclude.

The researchers found the qualitative research approach to be the most suitable for the study, given the research design and paradigm adopted. The qualitative approach enabled the collection of in-depth, authentic data from participants. Anderson (2017) posited that the qualitative approach provides participants with the opportunity to express their views and allows data to be collected in their natural environment. The approach was adopted because it provides for the collection of rich information directly from people.

Sampling

The paper adopted non-probability sampling methods to select the participants. The non-probability methods mainly used were convenience sampling. Participants were selected using convenience sampling. Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2024) describe convenience sampling as a method in which the researcher selects participants based on their relevance to the study and proximity to the research site. This approach minimizes costs, time, and potential data collection challenges. Based on this description, the researchers selected the site, sample, participants, and instruments based on their convenience for the study. This gave the researcher total control in selecting individuals who could provide answers to the question on participation in water provision. The study included 16 participants (N=16). This was determined by the saturation point reached during data collection. It aligns with the qualitative research principle that sampling continues until information redundancy is reached (Saunders et al., 2017). The sample size is within Creswell's (1998) recommended range of 5 to 25 participants for qualitative research. The saturation point in qualitative research is reached when no new information, themes, or insights emerge from further data collection. Once saturation is reached, researchers can be sure that they have thoroughly explored the main themes (Bryman, 2012).

Data collection

The researchers collected both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through interviews with participants, and secondary data were obtained through document analysis. The primary data were collected through face-to-face interviews, which allowed the researcher and participants to engage in in-depth conversations to ensure that the information generated addressed the research question and objectives. The researchers also gathered qualitative data using interview guides, self-administered questionnaires, and interviews. The interview guide included open-ended questions to elicit detailed narratives and to allow the researcher to probe for more details where necessary. McIntosh and Morse (2015) explain that an interview guide helps the researcher collect data relevant to the research question and objectives. Subsequently, Newcomer et al., (2015) argue that open-ended questions allow participants to freely share their views, perceptions, and interpretations of their reality. As a result, the researchers chose this approach to understand better the extent of people's involvement in water provision. Secondary data were collected from existing sources to explore what has been done and how it informs the research.

Data analysis

This study used the thematic analysis method to analyse the data. The method was chosen as the most appropriate due to its relevance to the qualitative study and flexibility. It allowed the researcher to use themes derived from the collected data, transcribed from audio and written field notes. Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to divide and organise the data into themes for easier analysis. This aligns with what Nowell et al., (2017) proposed: data must be read and large amounts broken down into smaller chunks, coded, and analysed for ease of explanation and to fulfil the objectives of the study. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility, allowing the researcher to identify themes that describe participants' views on participation and other key aspects of participatory water provision. This enabled the researcher to conclude the data. In this study, the researcher used written field notes and audio recordings collected during the data collection process. The researcher repeatedly listened to the recorded material, transcribed the content, and cleaned it to formulate themes that assisted in organising the received information.

Ethical Considerations

Before conducting the research and collecting data from participants, the researchers obtained the Ethical Clearance Certificate (Ref: UMP/Zulu Masters BDev/9/2020) from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Mpumalanga. Ethical clearance was granted, and all ethical considerations were observed and respected throughout the research. Vulnerability was strictly considered, and no vulnerable participants, such as minors, were included in the research. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time without any consequence. Informed consent was obtained through translated forms in both English and siSwati, ensuring participants fully understood the research's purpose, their rights, and how their data would be used. All data collection adhered to ethical guidelines, including proper citation of sources.

Results and Discussions

This section presents the main themes of the study. The themes emerged from data collected through 16 community members This included 5 males and 11 females. Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1:

Descriptive Summary of Community Members (n=16)

Participant No	Age	Gender	Marital status	Educational level	Employment Status	Household Size
1	37	Male	Married	Graduate	Employed	3
2	38	Male	Single	High School	Employed	4
3	40	Male	Single	Graduate	Employed	5
4	40	Female	Married	Graduate	Employed	13
5	35	Female	Single	Graduate	Employed	10
6	33	Female	Single	High School	Employed	5
7	40	Female	Single	Graduate	Retired	6
8	24	Female	Single	High School	Unemployed	5
9	55	Female	Widowed	No schooling	Retired	5
10	40	Female	Single	High School	Unemployed	4
11	42	Female	Married	High School	Employed	7
12	35	Male	Single	Graduate	Employed	6
13	60	Female	Widowed	No schooling	Retired	4
14	24	Female	Single	High School	Unemployed	5
15	27	Female	Married	High School	Unemployed	4
16	30	Male	Single	High School	Self-employed	6

The findings from the in-depth interviews are presented and discussed below

Theme 1: Participation in Water Provision

The findings from this study highlight that community participation in water provision in Tjakastad is primarily tokenistic and falls within the lower rungs of Arnstein's Ladder of Participation —*informing and consulting*. According to Arnstein, these levels reflect a form of participation in which the community is consulted or informed but lacks the real power to influence decisions. Most participants did not actively engage in decision-making processes but were involved during the implementation phase. For instance, Participant 5 expressed their frustration with this limited participation:

"I have never participated in water provision and have never attended any meetings because I have never been invited to participate in water supply projects. I only 'become visible 'when I have a problem by going to the ward councilors to report my issue."

It is at this level that the concept of Non-Participation, equivalent to the Manipulation rung in Arnstein's Ladder, is effectively illustrated. Within the framework, communities are only informed or involved in a tokenistic manner and do not become definite decision-makers. For instance, Boakye and Akpor (2012) found that in most cases in South Africa, community participation usually remains at the "*Informing level*", with very few opportunities for truthful participation. This also reflects Participant 5's experience of not being invited to meetings until a problem arises.

Other participants, such as Participant 3 described their participation as being limited to attending meetings and offering suggestions but not being able to influence decisions:

I do participate in water provision, and usually attend water supply project meetings. During meetings I sometimes propose changes that I think can be helpful, and I suggest solutions to other water problems that I have experienced. However, I do not participate in decision-making and implementation of water supply programmes that are meant to help us as a community.

This highlights Tokenism at the consultation level, where community members are consulted for their views but do not have significant say in the decision. As found by Boakye and Akpor (2012) in their study conducted in South Africa, although community members participate in meetings and express their views, their inputs most of the time do not influence major decisions.

Some participants, like Participant 12, indicated that their participation was mainly about receiving information rather than making meaningful contributions during the meetings:

I participate in water provision meetings, but my participation is limited to listening and get the information shared with us. I don't usually contribute much during the meetings. Again, I'm not involved in the actual implementation of ideas discussed during the meetings. That said, I would however, want to participate by being given a chance to express my views on how I think we should address problems that we are confronted with as the community of Tjakastad.

This also reflects the '*Consultation level*' of participation, where community members are only informed but not truly involved in the project's decision-making. Boakye and Akpor (2012) highlighted similar patterns in South Africa, where community members are only informed about decisions made by authorities, with no real involvement in the decision-making process. Others expressed their frustration with the nature of the meetings, feeling they were more passive recipients of information than active participants in the discussions. Participant 10 explained:

"Although we are usually invited to the meetings, it often feels more like we are being informed rather than being given a chance to express our views and to contribute in decision-making of the project. The municipality seemed to already have taken the decisions regarding the project without considering our views and, it seems like our role is just to convey the message to the community." They added, *"In the meetings we don't discuss the actual needs and challenges faced by the*

community. Instead, we just focus on what the municipal officials want to hear. Most of us don't feel like we are truly part of the decision-making.

The experiences of participants demonstrate manipulation and therapy, on the steps of Arnstein's ladder, by which, in most cases, the community is only consulted or informed about what is going on, and has no real power at all. The results clearly demonstrate that community participation was limited to implementation assistance, rather than planning, thus corresponding to the informing rung of the ladder. As Khan (1998) noted, this type of participation creates more resistance than genuine participation. This finding also extends to address Boakye and Akpor's (2012) critique of shallow participation by requiring greater depth.

Theme 2: Views on Participation in Water Needs Identification

A common theme established by participants 4, 7, 8, 9, and 11 was their views on participation in water needs identification. Applying the Arnstein Ladder of Participation to analyze how participants evaluated their engagement in identifying water needs helps clearly see different degrees of involvement, influence, and effectiveness of participation. According to the Arnstein model, three broad categories define participation: Non-Participation, Tokenism, and Citizen Power. Most of the time, when there is Non-Participation, people think that being informed equates to having the power to influence anything substantially, but not real, concrete power. This can best be described by those who express frustration, as they feel the process is ignoring or playing games with them. For instance, Participant 4 shared their frustration:

"I do not participate in meeting on water provision anymore. I believe there is no truth in this meetings. I have been raising the need of having a water tap in my yard. I raised that issue for the longest period of time with the municipal officials. They are aware of my problem. I never got any assistance. I have connected myself illegally to the water connection so that I can receive water. What frustrates me is that some of my neighbours have been given access to water and have water taps in their homes. This shows that there is no fairness. That why I don't participate in meeting to discuss water provision."

Participant 11 expressed the futility they felt from attending meetings:

"attending meetings is a waste of time and fruitless exercise in that the issues raised are never resolved and the municipality fails to address our needs. We are discouraged by failure or unresponsiveness of the municipality to the needs identified. Also, we no longer participate in meetings because our water supply problems remain unaddressed."

These sentiments reflect *Manipulation* (where citizens are informed but have no influence) and *Therapy* (where consultation serves as a form of appeasement without real action). The sentiments are consistent with the findings of Cele (2015) and Tshoose (2015), who argue that public participation often leads to frustration in South Africa due to citizens limited influence on actual service delivery and decision-making. Participants are of the view that they were heard, though not empowered to make decisions. For instance, Participant 8 explained that:

"My participation in meetings on water provision has helped me in having access to water. As a community, we participate to make the municipality aware of our water needs. We do make the municipal officials aware of our needs and we do a follow up until all our needs are met and resolved."

Participant 7 shared how initial enthusiasm for participation turned to disengagement due to unresolved issue:

"As a young and energetic person, I was participating in water provision projects in the area. However, I stopped attending because the issues raised were never considered. I lost interest and I stopped participating in water provision. Now I am old, and I don't care anymore about what happens

in water provision. I am just grateful for the arrival of water if it is provided. That is all that matters to me now."

Such perspectives emphasize the '*Informing and Consultation*' stages, in which the community is informed and consulted about plans for providing water, but lacks significant power to influence decisions or outcomes. Such experiences align with those of Hove et al. (2019) and Marks et al. (2014) whose works review the general superficiality of community participation in water management, wherein the participatory citizens holds minimal actual power to influence decision-making. Although the study did not clearly provide evidence of Citizen Power, one of the participants felt involved in the implementation phase without having decision-making power. Participant 9 expressed their role:

> *"I have participated in water provision. I was involved in the introduction of water metering systems to ensure that community households members receive and pay for water. I was given the opportunity to work with the municipal officials to introduce project"*

Though this view reflects some Partnership, it falls short of Delegated Power or Citizen Control, where communities would have real decision-making authority. This aligns with the views of Granier and Kudo (2016), which emphasize that while participation can involve consultation or implementation, it often falls short of achieving real empowerment. Real empowerment occurs when citizens hold meaningful decision-making authority, which is a key point in Arnstein's Ladder of Participation.

Theme 3: Non-Participation in Water Provision Meetings

Under Non-Participation, participants indicated that they have since withdrawn from the water provision meetings because they do not understand the purpose of their involvement. Some of them indicated a lack of access to information and understanding of what participation entails, attributing it to inadequate information. According to Arnstein's Ladder, this indicates *manipulation or therapy*; that is, when community members are either not informed or are consulted to give an appearance of involvement without real influence or power. Participant 4 stated:

> *"No one is giving us any information or knowledge about the importance of participation and other people are not encouraged as well, and they do not know their relevance to participate in water provision meetings."*

This view reflects Manipulation. The participants are not given adequate information, suggesting they are being manipulated into believing their participation has value. This is similar to what Beasley and Huillery (2011) describe: manipulation occurs when communities are led to believe in a pseudo-sense of participation. However, they do not have any real decision-making power. Mugwaneza (2019) supports this, noting that inadequate communication and a lack of information about participants' roles in water and sanitation projects reduce the avenues for meaningful engagement, thereby strengthening Manipulation. Similarly, Participant 3 commented on their non-participation:

> *"I have never participated in any of water supply meetings. I have never even attended any meeting because the municipal officials have never informed us as a community about any water supply projects. If I could get a chance to indicate why I do not participate, I would advise the municipal officials to do a mass communication (use a loud hailer) and inform us about water provision and its projects and allow us to participate in those projects. Also, it takes time for the municipality to communicate with the community."*

This sentiment points to Manipulation as participants are not even informed about meetings or projects, keeping them in the dark. The community is excluded from genuine participation, thus falling under the Non-Participation category of the ladder. At the Tokenism level, communities are consulted or informed but lack real power to influence decisions. They are allowed to participate in meetings;

however, their impact does not lead to any meaningful change in the decision-making process. Participant 6 expressed frustration over delayed communication:

"We sometimes wait four to five months without getting any communication or meeting about anything related to service delivery."

Such a delay in communication denotes Tokenism. This means that community involvement is limited to receiving information, but without any control over decisions. As described by Boakye and Akpor (2012), Tokenism in water resource management occurs when communities are allowed to attend meetings or be informed but lack the authority or means to affect outcomes. Tshoose (2015) also provided an account of frustration elicited through delayed communication, resulting in Tokenism, as the participation involved only receiving information, not decision-making or control. There is, generally and overtly, a lack of Citizen Power in this study: nobody speaks of having the power to make or enforce decisions on water provision; hence, Citizen Power is not being exercised.

Theme 4: Financial Obligations as a Deterrent

The theme of financial obligations as a deterrent highlights a barrier to participation. This theme reflects participants' sense that financial demands on them determine and limit their participation, willingly or otherwise. Some expressed that as long as the households' financial contribution towards water provision is elicited from them, they do not participate. Using Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, this concept can be analyzed within the frameworks of Tokenism and non-participation. The first invitation to participate in the water project reflects Tokenism because, though communities are informed about the project, they are not involved in decision-making. However, when participants are asked for a financial contribution, it is classified as Non-Participation due to financial constraints, and a section of the community is marginalized from meaningful participation. As expressed by participant 9:

"*I was part of the water metering system project, which focused mainly on installation of the metering systems. Most households could not afford or contribute as majority are unemployed and some rely on government grants. I know of a number of people who wanted to participate but they were limited by their financial situations."*

In this context, Tokenism is visible in that participants were initially involved in the project (i.e., they were informed and perhaps consulted about the metering system). Still, once the financial aspect was introduced, it acted as a barrier to participation. To encourage broader participation, municipalities must clearly communicate the financial implications from the start and explore alternative solutions for those who can't afford them. Tshona (2025) highlights the financial strain on rural communities in South Africa when paying for municipal services, especially water provision. These financial challenges only worsen the limited water supply, a major concern. Matimolane et al., (2025) further highlight the financial deficit in government funding for rural water projects. As a result, communities are left with few resources to address their water needs. In this situation, fostering public-private partnerships and implementing targeted subsidies for vulnerable communities could alleviate the financial strain.

Theme 5: Power Dynamics in Water Provision

Applying Arnstein's ladder, we examined how power dynamics affect the different levels of participation and influence that community members have in a water provision project. For instance, at the lowest level of Arnstein's ladder, those who become victims of favoritism or political influence and do not get an opportunity to make decisions fall into the category of being '*manipulated'*. Participant 5 shared their frustration with the lack of equal opportunities for participation:

"Some of us do not participate during the meeting because we experience discrimination and feel that there is favouritism. Most people that are given a chance to freely express themselves in

meetings have relatives or friends at the municipality and some are connected to the councilors. Those like us who do not have relatives or friends at the municipality are often discriminated and our inputs are not taken serious. We are sometimes not even invited to participate in meetings."

This view highlights Non-Participation where certain people or groups are excluded from the process because of their lack of connections. It reinforces the idea that participation is not truly open to all. This notion is supported by Adams and Zulu (2015), who highlight that political favoritism and exclusion are barriers in community-based water governance.

The Tokenism level of participation is evident in the unequal treatment participants observed during community meetings. Participant 13 witnessed how family members and friends of municipal officials were treated differently:

"I have seen how some family members and friends of the municipal officials being treated differently or special during the meetings and their inputs being taken into consideration while we are being ignored."

These findings demonstrate that community members' participation is often symbolic, contributing only to create an illusion of inclusion. In the words of Marks, Komives, and Davis (2014), input from communities in rural water supply projects is often solicited but does not weigh significantly on decisions. This ends up creating tokenistic participation. Formality can result in involvement having no significant impact on the outcome. At the highest levels of Citizen Power, community members should share decision-making authority and influence project outcomes. However, in community meetings, Citizen Power is hardly extant. As precipitated by Participants 10 and 3, political interference affects participation and decision-making. For instance, participant 10 stated:

"Political interference has influenced service delivery in that it allows different political parties to direct the service delivery and other development projects towards specific and favoured areas and this includes provision of water. We are discouraged by interference of political parties. That is why participation decreases when political parties are interfering with service delivery and provision of water"

Participant 3 elaborated on the impact of political party affiliations on participation:

"Political parties promote favouritism in water provision and affects people participating in the project if they are not members of the party directing the project. When you are part of a certain political party, you tend to receive information about projects that other members in opposing parties would not receive. When you are an active member of the party, you are given preferential treatment in projects including water provision. Ordinary people are not considered."

This describes a scenario in which political power determines who has access to information and opportunities in water provision projects, pushing out those not aligned with favored political groups. As a result, Citizen Power is not realized, and those in positions of political authority make decisions. These findings are supported by Hove et al. (2019), who discuss how political interference in South Africa limits genuine participation in local development projects, including water provision. Corruption exacerbates the situation by fostering an environment where political favoritism and nepotism thrive.

Conclusion

This paper has assessed community participation in water provision at Tjakastad, South Africa. It can be concluded that, though residents participate in public affairs, their participation is largely symbolic. Most of the action takes place at the lower rungs of Arnstein's Ladder, where communities are informed and consulted but do not wield any real decision-making power. This window-dressing participation has frustrated residents and discouraged them from participating in service delivery

activities in their community, rendering water provision meetings fruitless and leaving major issues unaddressed.

These results highlight the importance of transparent participation in water governance, where residents are genuinely empowered to take part and influence decision-making. Until such a time, addressing water insecurity will remain a challenge and ineffective for the marginalized inhabitants. Therefore, policymakers and stakeholders must first ensure effective, purposive participation by those most concerned about water shortages to achieve more sustainable and equitable solutions.

Ultimately, if communities do not gain real power in decision-making, frustration will continue to rise due to unmet needs, potentially leading to community unrest. The study's limitations are due to the small sample size. As a result, this may not fully generalize to other rural areas in South Africa or elsewhere. However, it could be applied to similar rural regions with similar socio-political and economic conditions. On the other hand, enhancing community participation in water governance would be highly beneficial, not just in South Africa, but also in similar areas across Africa and worldwide.

Recommendations

1. **Encourage transparent participation:** Develop strategies that empowers community members to have real decision-making power in water provision projects, moving beyond tokenism to meaningful involvement.

2. **Adjust communication methods:** Ensure that all community members, particularly those who are marginalized, are properly informed and encouraged to participate.

3. **Empower local leaders:** Provide them with the necessary resources to work effectively. Such will ensure that community concerns are clearly shared and addressed in the choices being made.

4. **Address Political Interference:** Strengthen the transparency of the decision-making process to minimize the impact of political favoritism and ensure equal access for all community members.

5. **Investigate the Impact of Empowered Participation:** Future studies should assess how increased community control over water projects impacts service delivery and sustainability.

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