Utilisation of M-government in Matjhabeng local municipality: a necessity for effective public participation

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ABSTRACT

Since the first case of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa in 2020, public participation in municipalities took a knock as COVID-19 regulations prohibited large crowds from gathering. Because the Matjhabeng local municipality’s valuation roll was about to be renewed, this became a major point of contention. As a result, this article investigated how Matjhabeng local municipality conducted public participation to comply with the law during the pandemic. The study is primarily quantitative, but qualitative aspects are also included. According to the findings, the municipality failed to use other platforms to ensure that no one was left behind while drafting the rates policy. As a result, it is suggested that the use of m-government in Matjhabeng local municipality is necessary for public participation during COVID-19 and beyond.

Introduction

In South Africa, public participation is one of the democratic principles embedded in the local government policy framework. As a matter of law, local municipalities are obliged to follow laws that encourage public participation in municipal affairs. This is critical because municipalities must be able to respond to their external surroundings. However, in the wake of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown levels implemented to alleviate its effects, public participation in municipalities suffered a significant blow because people were prohibited from gathering in large numbers.

Alert level 5 for Covid-19 began on 26 March 2020 to 30 April 2020. Alert level 4 became effective on 1 to 31 May 2020. Thereafter, Alert level 3 was in effect from 1 June 2020 to 17 August 2020. This was followed by the introduction of Alert level 2 on 18 August, which ran through to 20 September 2020. Alert level 1 was in effect from 21 September to 28 December 2020. Despite this, the South African government was forced to revert to Alert level 3 as a result of an increase in infections during the December period. Therefore, an adjusted Alert level 3 took place from 29 December 2020 until the publication of the new Alert level 1 regulation in the Government Gazette (South African Government, no date: online), which took place on 01 March 2021 (Republic of South Africa. Government Gazette, 2021(a)).

As outlined above, during those different levels of lockdown in the country, social gatherings were limited to a certain number of people, and for specific purposes, such as funerals. Gatherings were totally inhibited at level 5. Funerals were permitted at this level, but not over fifty (50) people could attend. As a result of the policy framework, holding public participation meetings on issues like the valuation of the properties became a serious challenge for municipalities in South Africa. As Matjhabeng Local Municipality was due to renew its valuation roll, this matter became a point of contention. Due to the Covid-19 regulations, residents claimed that normal procedures for public participation were not followed (Will, 2021(a)).
As a result, residents of Matjhabeng Local Municipality were notified that they must lodge objection if they disagree that the valuation is market related. The valuation roll was supposed to be on the municipal website. Additionally, every property owner was to receive a notice, along with a copy of the roll pertaining to their property (Will, 2021(a)).

Given the preceding arguments, this article was motivated to investigate how Matjhabeng Local Municipality implemented public participation to comply with the law during the pandemic. If there is anything to be learned from China, where this virus started, it is that the world is still not out of the woods from Covid-19. The following are the research questions aimed at achieving the aforementioned:

i. When the Covid-19 pandemic hits, what should the municipalities in South Africa do to engage the public?
ii. While the Covid-19 pandemic was in full swing, what steps was taken by Matjhabeng local Municipality to engage the public in the drafting of the property rates policy?
iii. How well were the house (property) owners aware of the process of valuing their homes?
iv. Is there a way to encourage public participation in Matjhabeng Local Municipality during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond?

The view that Matjhabeng Local Municipality should be able to adapt to changes in its environment to ensure that participatory democracy processes are not undermined during and after the Covid-19 pandemic is central to these questions. Considering this, technology has also been crucial in this discourse. It is important for organisations like municipalities to be aware of how their operations are impacted by environmental issues and to have a connection to the external environment. Thus, Meno (2016) states that this is a feature of system theory that is pertinent to public participation. Furthermore, Meno (2016) emphasises that the systems theory, among other things, supports giving people some degree of power and voice over issues that affect their life.

**Literature Review**

**Theoretical and Conceptual Background**

**Systems Theory: An Overview**

The scientific investigation of systems theories and the development of systems theories in various sciences have resulted in the development of a general theory of systems, a set of interconnected concepts and principles that apply to all systems. Pioneers of the systems movement such as Ashby, Bertalanffy, Boulding, Fagen, Gerard, Rappoport, and Wiener established the basic concepts and principles of general theory of systems in the early 1950s. These trailblazers came from a wide range of disciplines and fields of study. They all agreed on one thing, ‘unified nature of reality’. They saw a compelling need for a multidisciplinary investigation to comprehend and address growing complexities, complexities that are beyond the scope of any single discipline. As a result, they developed a transdisciplinary perspective that emphasised the world's inherent order and interdependence in all of its forms. Their contributions spawned systems theory, the science of complexity (Banathy, 1996).

Bertalanffy (1973) cited in Chikere and Jude (2015) recognised the need for any organisation to interact with its external environment. According to him, in order for an organisation like, a municipality, to survive, it should operate in an open system rather than a closed system. This is what led to his work in establishing system concepts as a global approach that organisations can use to improve their efficiency and effectiveness in dynamic and changing environments. He was opposed to reductionism, arguing that real systems are open and interact with their surroundings, and he emphasised holism when solving organizational problems.

Based on the arguments of these systems theory proponents, it is possible to conclude that organisations such as municipalities should understand their external environments because they affect them and present opportunities to improve their operations. As previously stated, Covid-19 had an impact on municipalities, which necessitated Matjhabeng Local Municipality to modify its public participation processes. According to Mofolo (2015), the external environment of municipalities includes social-cultural forces, economic forces, technological forces, and political or legal forces, such as statutory control directives, within which municipalities must operate. This implies that municipalities are not self-sufficient or self-contained as part of public administration (Theletsane, 2019).

The same can be said about the impact of the fourth industrial revolution on government operations in other countries that have incorporated technological opportunities into their operations. According to Manda and Dhaou (2019), the fourth industrial revolution, also known as Industry 4.0, has brought significant social and economic opportunities… to which governments must respond appropriately. The spread of mobile technologies and mobile phones, which many countries are taking advantage of to facilitate public participation, is one of the opportunities in the context of local government and government in general (Nzimakwe, 2018). This variable will be examined further in this study. Understanding public participation is the focus of the following section.

**Understanding Public Participation**

Oftentimes, public, community, or citizen participation are used interchangeably in the field of Public Administration and Management (Reddy and Sikhakhane, 2008; Tshishonga and Mbambo, 2008; Mle, 2014; van der Waldt, 2014; Thebe, 2016). A challenge to the use of community and public participation is presented by van der Waldt (2014), who cites Plamenatz (1977).
According to Plamenatz (1977), community and public participation are inaccurate in South Africa because of the diversity and heterogeneity of its context, but citizen participation would be much more accurate.

Despite this argument being plausible, the words public and community participation are used in this article to facilitate the discourse in order to align with the municipal policy framework which emphasises both terms. To begin with, one can argue that public participation is no longer a new concept in the South African local government. In numerous scholarly publications since the inception of democracy in 1994, this concept has been researched and written about. As mentioned earlier, the concept is the most important legislative principle for good governance. Mle (2014) advocates public participation as an indispensable component of good governance. The right of the public to contribute to municipal affairs that are intended to improve their lives and wellbeing cannot be waived.

According to Mavee (2014) in Thebe (2016), public participation offers the following rights, which are prerequisites for any decision made by municipality in South Africa:

i. The right to be informed
ii. Freedom of expression
iii. A right to legally challenge government decisions
iv. The right to reach a consensus
v. Freedom of choice

It is evident from these prerequisites that community members have a critical role to play in influencing the intentions of South African municipalities. As a result, Ile, Eresia-Eke, and Allen-Ile (2012) emphasise the importance of consultative, cooperative, and consensus-building public participation. According to these authors, community participation is not just about that policies are followed but assuring that they have enough support. Moreover, they suggest that any misgivings that could be harboured by the parties involved should be addressed thoroughly to bring about ownership of the policy directives in the light of new realities.

Considering the sentiments expressed in the local newspaper, Vista, dated 11 February 2021, regarding Matjhabeng local municipality’s service delivery, the above suggestion is more essential than ever. In this newspaper, Will (2021(a)) reveals that one of the local experts on the local government law, expressed the opinions in the following manner “With service levels deteriorating in Matjhabeng, objections to the new valuation roll, and a boycott of increased taxes, are to be expected. The principle is simple. If you pay for something, you expect delivery thereof. Unfortunately, this simple truth eludes the Matjhabeng powers that be”.

If anything is to be deduced from the above sentiments, one can infer that there was a lack of public ownership of the policy directives on the renewal of the Matjhabeng local municipality’s valuation roll. In other words, those calls were made to object to the new evaluation roll results.

**Ladder of Participation**

Over the years, a highly regarded ladder of participation in the field of Public Administration and Management has guide public participation. Arnstein introduced an eight-level typology of public participation in 1969, which is depicted in this ladder. As Lauria and Slotterback (2021) note, it has been over 50 years since this ladder of participation has been utilised for substantive participation by citizens in decision-making. Arnstein (1969) states, “Participation of the governed in their government is, in theory, the cornerstone of democracy – a revered idea that is vigorously applauded by virtually everyone”.

The topology of eight levels of public participation is illustrated in Table 1.

### Table 1: The Ladder of Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citizen control</th>
<th>Degree of citizen power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delegated power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placation</td>
<td>Degree of tokenism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informing</td>
<td>Nonparticipation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Adapted from Arnstein, 1969.*

Table 1 shows three types of community participation in government decision-making, namely nonparticipation, tokenism, and citizen power. The nonparticipation category, according to Arnstein (1969), involves manipulating community members to bring government decisions into fruition without their input. Governments in this category only inform citizens of their intentions, but do
not solicit contributions from them. The decision-making process of government in these situations is handled by politicians and officials (Ile, et al., 2012).

Under tokenism, communities get opportunity to listen, speak and be heard. Basically, citizens are provided with a platform of expressing their opinions. Despite this, they lack the power to ensure that their views and proposals will be implemented. As Arnstein states, “when participation is restricted to these levels, there is no follow-through, no “muscle,” hence no assurance of changing the status quo (Arnstein, 1969:217)”. As a result, Ile, et al. (2012) conclude that soliciting citizens’ input serves to placate their concerns while remaining silent on the underlying social issues.

In light of the above discussion, one can conclude that community consultation meetings in South African municipalities are not significantly impacting citizens’ needs and demands. Hence, there have been a lot of protests in the country regarding service delivery. The purpose of these community meetings is only to comply with the law.

Nevertheless, Arnstein (1969) believes that citizens have a certain amount of power in the upper categories of the ladder. Mautjana and Makombe (2014) indicate that community power can only be achieved when citizens hold most of the seats in government committees and wield power over certain government decisions. Ile et al. (2012) propose, on the other hand, the establishment of joint consultative forums to exercise citizen power. As argued in the following sections of this article, the preceding is a form of representative democracy that has been criticised for stifling the majority's aspirations.

Reflection on Global Property Rate Practices

The terms property tax and rates are used interchangeably in this context. This is because, globally, more emphasis is placed on the use of property tax rather than rates. As a result, the term "rates" is also used to describe the property taxes imposed by municipalities on fixed properties such as commercial and residential properties (Enwereji and Kadama, 2018:277).

It should be noted that property taxes are the primary source of municipal revenue in the majority of the world's countries. For example, many developing and transitioning countries have developed an interest in property taxes. This is because property tax is regarded as an important mechanism for raising revenue at the municipal level (United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2009). There are even various assessment bases used to assess property tax around the world. Table 2 below illustrates this point.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tax base</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Measure used</th>
<th>Examples of countries where used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Market value</td>
<td>The price that would be reached in an arm's-length transaction between a willing buyer and seller.</td>
<td>Sales comparison, depreciated cost, or income method</td>
<td>Australia, Canada, Indonesia, Japan, United States, South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site value</td>
<td>The price that would be agreed upon between a willing buyer and seller in an arm's-length transaction.</td>
<td>Comparable sales after deducting the value of improvements from the total property value</td>
<td>Jamaica, Kenya, New Zealand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rental value</td>
<td>Value in current use</td>
<td>Net rental income</td>
<td>France, Morocco, parts of India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit value</td>
<td>Property size modified to reflect location, quality, or other factors</td>
<td>Adjusted land and building square meters</td>
<td>Armenia, Czech Republic, Israel, Poland, Russia, Slovakia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-assessment</td>
<td>Sales price</td>
<td>Determined by the property's owner</td>
<td>Peru, Turkey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitional or mixed systems</td>
<td>Area and market value combination</td>
<td>Market-priced zones for land or land and buildings</td>
<td>Estonia, Latvia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Similarly, as shown in Table 2, property rates in South African municipalities are regarded as one of the critical sources of revenue. According to Mazibuko (2014) in Molobela (2016), property rates are one of the main sources of revenue in South African municipalities, along with levies and service charges for water, electricity, sewage and sanitation, and refuse removal; unconditional and conditional grants from the national government; and municipal borrowing.

Legal Requirements for Property Rates in relation to Protocols for Covid-19

Section 229 of the South African Constitution grants municipalities the authority to levy property taxes (Republic of South Africa, 1996). The Municipal Property Rates Act was enacted to give effect to this Section. Among other things, the Municipal Property Rates Act aims to:

i. regulate the power of a municipality to impose rates on the property;

Table 2: Base for property taxes
ii. exclude certain properties from rating in the national interest;
iii. make provision for municipalities to implement a transparent and fair system of exemptions, reductions, and rebates through their rating policies;
iv. make provision for fair and equitable valuation methods of properties; and
v. make provision for an objections and appeals process (Republic of South Africa, 2004:2).

According to Fourie and Opperman (2015), all rateable properties within a municipality must be valued in accordance with the provisions of the Municipal Property Rates Act. Section 2 of this Act states that only metropolitan and local municipalities are authorized to impose rates on rateable properties. Chapter 2 of the Municipal Property Rates Act, among other things, specifies the procedure for rating properties, as well as the provisions and contents of municipal rate policy and community participation.

According to this Chapter (Chapter 2), community participation must take place prior to the adoption of the municipal rates policy. It also states that after community input, a municipal manager must post the draft rates policy in municipal offices, libraries, and on a municipal website for 30 days. Furthermore, a media announcement should be made that a draft rates policy has been prepared for submission to the council and that the draft rates policy is available for public inspection during office hours at municipal offices and libraries, as well as on a municipal website. Following that, this Chapter states that a municipality must invite the local community to submit comments and representations to the municipality within the time frame specified in the notice, which cannot be less than 30 days (Republic of South Africa, 2004).

The above provisions of the Act had to be abandoned as a result of the Covid-19 regulations, as municipalities had to implement alternative measures or modes of engagement with communities. This was in response to Government Gazette No. 43291, which was issued on 7 May 2020 by Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, former Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) (Republic of South Africa, Government Gazette, 2021(b)). Matjhabeng Local Municipality was also required to devise alternative methods of consultation with communities that differed from traditional consultation meetings, as municipalities were instructed to use media platforms and other alternative methods of consultation with communities.

Vista Newspaper reported on February 25, 2021, that due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Municipality had to resort to other mediums, including "informative meetings" with the Local Business Chamber of Commerce, Homeowners Associations, and Farming Communities - and these bodies agreed to assist the Municipality (Vista, 2021(b)). These bodies obviously represented communities and assisted the Municipality in complying with the law. As a result, it is reasonable to conclude that other media platforms were not used to solicit submissions from the larger community.

Returning to Chapter 2 of the Municipal Property Rates Act, it states that "when it considers the draft rates policy, a municipal council must take all comments and presentations made to it or received by it into account" (Republic of South Africa, 2004). Concerns about this provision stem from the fact that the Municipality consulted the aforementioned groupings, which begs the question: To what extent do they represent communities in Matjhabeng Local Municipality? Although these organisations are non-profit, membership in them requires payment, which may be unfavourable for most people from disadvantaged areas, such as those in townships.

As stated earlier in this article, open systems theory requires municipalities to take advantage of opportunities presented by their external environment in situations like this. As a result, many municipalities around the world have seized technological opportunities such as mobile government (m-government) to increase public participation and communicate efficiently and effectively with communities. As such, the following section examines m-government.

A Glance at M-Government

The method of public participation adopted by Matjhabeng Local Municipality during Covid-19 confirms that the potential of harnessing m-government in developing countries remains largely untapped. This is happening despite these countries' efforts to expand mobile network infrastructure, which is necessary for citizens to access information and services via wireless devices (Mengistu, Zo, and Rho, 2009).

However, South Africa has seen a few cases of m-government, particularly at the local government level. Makwembere and Garidzirai (2021) explain these cases as follows:

i. Stellenbosch Local Municipality - uses m-government to allow residents to apply for houses online and avoid long lines.
ii. Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality - Vodacom funded its m-government system to improve communication with residents. Furthermore, the system is used to report service delivery incidents and to make suggestions for service delivery improvements.
iii. Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality – its mobile app allows residents to pay bills, purchase electricity, and access their monthly statements. The goal of using this m-government system in this municipality is to reduce the problem of long wait times and to speed up service delivery.
iv. The City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality - uses a user-friendly system. Its m-government system can provide statistics, resident profiles, consumption, and also allows residents to access their balances and pay their bills online.
In a nutshell, m-government is an extension of or addition to electronic government (e-government). The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) by the government to improve its activities and engagement with other stakeholders, including citizens, is central to electronic government. Because of the proliferation of wireless devices, such as mobile phones, around the world, a new paradigm shift from e-government to m-government has become the norm (Lallana, 2008; Dlamini and Mpekoa, 2017).

Dlamini and Mpekoa (2017) argue in their proposed five-stage m-government model that these mobile devices enable participation and access to government information. As a result, these authors support the expansion of government services from e-government to m-government. "Social media offers a 24 x 7 x 365 communication, increasing open participation, anytime and anywhere access to accommodate all citizens, even those in rural areas," they argue. Even international organisations, such as the World Bank, support m-government. The World Bank, for example, advocates for the use of m-government by stating:

**Mobile government efforts have made use of mobile’s potential for wider citizen engagement and participation to strengthen accountability and transparency in public services and processes. These efforts are typically innovative because they often change the delivery or management of a conventional service or process.**

Taking the foregoing assertions into account, one can only conclude that m-government is appropriate, particularly during Covid-19 and beyond, for promoting participatory democracy in South African municipalities. According to Modise (2017), representative democracy subjugates participatory democracy. In this regard, he emphasises that in South Africa representative democracy is prioritised over participatory democracy. In light of this, one can only conclude that the status of participatory democracy must be elevated in the South African municipalities if community views and proposals are to be taken seriously. In this sense, m-government can be regarded as a panacea for communication challenges, as citizens will be able to engage and follow through on their submissions, as well as obtain municipal information easily and quickly (Al-Hujran, 2012).

**Research Methodology**

The research is a case study of Matjhabeng Local Municipality. Matjhabeng is a local municipality in South Africa's Free State province. This Municipality is located between the well-known town of Kroonstad in the north and Bloemfontein in the south. The Municipality is made up of six (6) towns, the first four (4) of which are mining towns (Allanridge, Okedendaars, Welkom, and Virginia), and the last two (2) are agricultural towns (Hennenman and Ventersburg) (Wikipedia: Online).

The study is primarily quantitative, but the qualitative research method is used in the questionnaire for open research questions. Furthermore, the study employed mixed methods or triangulations to examine how Matjhabeng Local Municipality handled public participation during the covid-19 pandemic. As shown earlier in this study, there are allegations that “… the normal prescribed public participation processes were not adhered to due to the Covid-19 regulations”. As a result, it was of interest to learn how public participation was handled in this Municipality. This necessitated the use of mixed methods to supplement each other and collect more data (Bless, Higson-Smith, and Sithole, 2013).

The quantitative section focused on the questionnaire's closed-ended questions, whereas the qualitative section focused on the questionnaire's open-ended questions. A total of two hundred (200) questionnaires were distributed to respondents who live in Welkom, including its townships of Thabong and Bronville.

**Sampling techniques**

Convenient sampling and snowball sampling were used in the study to select 200 individuals, who ultimately made up the study's sample. Selecting participants who are easily accessible is known as convenient sampling, whereas snowball sampling occurs when people suggest other participants to one another. This was accomplished by speaking with respondents from Welkom and its townships, asking them to help distribute more questionnaires at their places of employment.

This sample size of 200 respondents was thought to be sufficient to provide a clear picture of the issue this study revealed. In other words, rather than generalising the results, the goal was to draw attention to the respondents' thoughts and feelings on public participation in the Matjhabeng Local Municipality's renewal of the valuation roll. Based on the suggestion of Sekaran and Bougie (2016), who state that a sample of 30 to 500 is adequate for a population that is not well defined, infinite, or whose numbers cannot be easily confirmed, therefore, the sample was deemed sufficient. Providing perceptions and views of the respondents to the questions presented in the introduction was a major focus of this study's inquiry.

**Analysis and Findings**

The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS version 27.0, which enabled the creation of frequency tables. Thematic analysis was used to examine qualitative data.

As shown above, 200 questionnaires were distributed to gather data. In total, 177 questionnaires were returned. The response rate was 88.5%. Of the 177 respondents, 33.9% (60) were males, while the majority, 66.1% (117), were females. The racial groups from which the data was drawn are listed in the following order: 61.0% (108) were Africans, 34.5% (61) were Whites, 4.0% (7) were Coloureds, and 6% (1) were Indians. This data is shown in Table 3 below.
Table 3: Gender and race of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>33.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>66.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>61.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>35.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 summarises the responses of the 177 respondents to the question that sought to reveal their level of knowledge about the Matjhabeng Local Municipality's property valuation roll. According to the table, 27.7% (49) of respondents indicated that they know the basis of this Municipality's property valuation roll, while 72.3% (128) indicated that they do not.

Table 4: The basis of the property valuation roll

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The basis of the property valuation roll</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>27.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>72.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author

Table 5 shows the responses of respondents to questions aimed at determining whether the Matjhabeng Local Municipality informed them about the market value of their properties and whether they are aware of the factors that influence the market value of their properties. Of the 177 respondents, 32.2% (57) said the Municipality did inform them. However, 67.8% (120) of respondents stated that the Municipality did not inform them of the market value of their properties. Furthermore, 29.9% (53) of the 177 respondents agreed that they are aware of the factors influencing the market value of their properties. However, 70.1% (124) of respondents stated that they were unaware of these factors.

Table 5: Knowledge of market value and factors that influence the value of the properties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of the market value of the properties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>67.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The factors that influence the value of the properties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>29.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>70.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author

Another question sought to determine, in light of the Covid-19 protocols, whether the Municipality engaged in community participation in the development of the rates policy. In response to this question, 2.8% (5) of the 177 respondents answered positively, while 97.2% (172) revealed that the Municipality did not conduct community participation as required by law.

In addition, respondents were asked how they rated community participation in Matjhabeng Local Municipality. Community participation in this municipality was rated as very poor or poor by 94.4% (162). However, 5.1% (9) of respondents rated community participation as average, while 0.6% (1) rated community participation as excellent. These findings are shown in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Community participation during the draft of the rates policy and generally before Covid-19
The respondents were also asked if they received notices from the Municipality about the availability of the valuation roll for inspection or if they went to the municipal offices to check it. 15.8% (28) of those who responded said they had received the notices. However, 84.2% (149) of respondents reported not receiving notices. Respondents were once again asked which channel they preferred to communicate with their municipality during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Of the 177 respondents, 36.7% (65) preferred email, 26.0% (46) preferred SMS, 28.8% (51) preferred WhatsApp, and 8.5% (15) preferred other channels such as newspapers and local radio. Furthermore, the 177 respondents responded to the question about whether the Municipality had ever contacted them through one of the aforementioned online communication channels. The responses to this question show that 37.9% (67) gave positive answers, but 62.1% (110) indicated that the Municipality had never used an online communication channel to contact them. These findings are shown in Table 7 below.

Table 7: The inspection of the valuation roll and communication channels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Availability of the valuation roll for inspection</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred channels to communicate with the municipality during Covid-19</td>
<td>Email</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SMS</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WhatsApp</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: State of service delivery in the municipality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State of service delivery in the municipality</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, a general question was posed to determine respondents’ level of satisfaction with service delivery in Matjhabeng Local Municipality. 1.7% (3) of the total (177) respondents stated that they were content. However, 98.3% (174) of respondents said they are dissatisfied with the state of service delivery in this municipality. This information is depicted in Table 8 below.

Table 8: State of service delivery in the municipality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State of service delivery in the municipality</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked to provide advice to the Municipality, the majority (46%) or 92 of the respondents mentioned, among other things, that the Municipality needs to improve communication with communities. Some opinions on this subject have been expressed as follows:

i. There is no communication at all from the Municipality and there is also no one ever available for serious issues that need to be rectified.
ii. Be more communicative. Communicate pertinent information
iii. "No communication at all - except for recent property valuation.

Discussion

Source: Author
This section contains discussions and recommendations based on the descriptive statistical analysis results and the findings presented above.

The basis of the property valuation roll

As shown in Table 4, the majority of respondents, 72.3% (128), do not know the basis of Matjhabeng Local Municipality's property roll. This is a cause for concern, especially since these respondents are property owners who contribute to the municipality’s tax collection. One can also conclude that the taxpayers in this municipality are apparently unaware of how the Municipality is run, which is contrary to the Batho Pele Principles.

Regarding openness and transparency as one of the Batho Pele Principles, Pietersen (2014) states that citizens should be informed about how government institutions are run, how much they cost, and who is in charge. In light of this, it is clear that property owners should be aware of how Matjhabeng Local Municipality is run and how much money is required to run this municipality. As a result, knowing how the Municipality is run should enable them to understand the basis of the municipality's evaluation roll. This knowledge may also help them hold the Municipality accountable for how their money is spent.

Knowledge of market value and factors that influence the value of the properties

The analyses in Table 5 concentrate on related variables, namely property market value and factors influencing property market value. Given this Table, it is astonishing that 67.8% (120) of respondents, compared to 32.2% (57), were unaware of the market value of their properties. This is surprising because it was reported in Vista Newspaper on 11 February 2021 that property owners would receive an extract of the roll incidental to their properties via mail (Will (2021(a))

The Batho Pele Principles, as well as the Basic Values and Principles governing public administration, which also apply to local government under Section 195 of the Constitution, require municipalities to be transparent and to provide timely, accessible, and accurate information to the public (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Given this principle, it is obvious that property owners should have been informed about the market value of their properties, as this information is necessary for reaching a consensus. However, the referred local newspaper (Vista, 2021(a)) still shows the notice that the valuation roll was available on the municipality's website and at the municipality's six (6) offices, which are located in all of the towns that make up Matjhabeng Local Municipality.

Furthermore, based on the analyses presented in Table 5, it is clear that property owners in Matjhabeng Local Municipality are unaware of municipal valuation and property tax. This conclusion is based on the fact that, of the 177 respondents, 70.1% (124), compared to 29.9% (53) did not know the factors influencing the market value of their properties.

Location, size of property, extent and type of buildings, quality, and condition of the property, among other things, influence the value of a property, according to Drakenstein Local Municipality (no date: online). This information is critical and should be known by all property owners in the Matjhabeng Local Municipality. Furthermore, property owners should be aware of the method used to determine the market value of their properties.

Different methods are used in municipalities to determine the market value of various properties. According to Ramakhula (2010), methods for determining property market value include:

i. Comparable Sales Approach;
ii. Income Capitalisation Approach;
iii. Cost Approach, which includes, Reproduction Cost Approach and Depreciated Replacement Cost Approach; and

There is no doubt that the Matjhabeng Local Municipality should have informed the property owners about the approach used and also explained its mode of operation. This type of engagement with citizens has the potential to foster mutual understanding and acceptance of policy realities, as previously discussed in this article. This could help to avoid sentiments like "residents have queried how these property values were determined, and experts have given senseless explanations as to the reasoning behind the insane valuation" (Will, 2021(b)).

Community participation during the draft of the rates policy and generally before Covid-19

Table 6 contains information about related variables. As a result, as discussed in this study, community participation is essential for the implementation of any municipal policy, including the municipal rates policy. According to the findings in Table 6, 97.2% (172) of respondents claimed that Matjhabeng Local Municipality did not conduct community participation during the draft of the rates policy, while only 2.8% (5) claimed the opposite. This explanation confirms the actions taken by the Municipality in response to Government Gazette No. 43291, which was previously discussed in this article.

The Covid-19 has altered traditional methods of community participation, and it has superseded policy directives as well as general municipal practices. As a result, South African municipalities, including Matjhabeng Local Municipality, should begin to use e-government. It is obvious that m-government cannot be ignored during and after the crisis. According to Fraser-Moleketi (2020), the world has changed and will not return to "business as usual" even after the crisis has passed.

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Given the lessons learned from this period, Matjhabeng Local Municipality must begin to investigate the benefits and opportunities of m-governance in order to fully implement the principle of participatory democracy.

The preceding assertion is critical, especially in light of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which were adopted by the world's countries in September 2015. The commitment to the axiom 'no one is left behind' is critical to these Goals. According to UNDP (no date, 4):

**People get left behind when they lack the choices and opportunities required to participate and benefit from development progress. All persons living in extreme poverty, in any form, are left behind, together with those enduring disadvantage(s) that deny or limit their choices and opportunities relative to others in society.**

This article wholeheartedly agrees with the preceding quotation. Matjhabeng Local Municipality should work hard to ensure that no one is left behind, especially when it comes to important issues in which people must participate, such as deciding on their tax contributions. This simply means that the Municipality should not rely on the associations to determine future property tax rates. Such associations exacerbate the overshadowing of participatory democracy by representative democracy. Worse, as May (2011) points out, the membership of these ratepayers' associations is largely made up of elites or individuals from 'well-off' communities.

Consistent with the foregoing, it has also been reported that, even prior to the Covid-19 restrictions, community participation in this Municipality was still unsatisfactory. These findings are repeated in Table 5 above. Community participation was rated as very poor or poor by 94.4% (162) of respondents. This situation cannot be overlooked because it contradicts the progressive idea of "no one is left behind." As a result, it cannot be overstated that the Matjhabeng Local Municipality should work quickly and diligently to implement m-government.

**The inspection of the valuation roll and communication channels**

Even in this subsection, the discussions will remain focused on the relevant variables. Table 7 displays data on the receipt of notices for the inspection of the municipal valuation roll. Despite the fact that the Matjhabeng Local Municipality published notices in the local newspaper, Vista, and on the municipal website, an overwhelming number of respondents, 84.2% (149), compared to only 15.8% (28), reported not receiving those notices.

Given the foregoing, it is clear that some property owners in Matjhabeng Local Municipality do not read local newspapers. As a result, relying on local newspapers to distribute notices may not always be effective in reaching the intended readers. It is possible that some of the intended readers are not even receiving these local newspapers. Aside from the use of newspapers and the municipal website, a new approach of using social media or m-government, as previously suggested, is regarded as a panacea in this instance for leaving no one behind. The literature revealed that "social media offers a 24 x7 x 365 communication".

According to Gilbert (2019), the latest StatsSA General Household Survey discovered that smartphone usage in the country increased to 88.2% in 2017. As a result, this becomes a benefit in terms of communication and ensuring that municipal notices reach their intended recipients.

As a result, the disadvantage of relying on the municipality's website to convey notices to citizens is also demonstrated. However, as stated in the cited local newspaper, Vista, this is convenient for some citizens, particularly the elites or those from well-off communities, and it aids in avoiding physically having to go to municipal offices. "The public will want to forego standing in line at city hall... when a few clicks on entity’s website will accomplish the same task," Fraser-Moleketi (2020:267) observes. Notwithstanding that, the World Bank (2012) still maintains that "...mobile tools can expand the reach of conventional public services or government processes to citizens who are unserved or underserved, often because of their remote location or the non-availability of PCs and internet access".

Table 7 emphasises the preference for channels of communication with the Municipality, revealing that only a small percentage, 8.5% (15) of respondents, compared to 91.5% (162), prefer other channels of communication with the Municipality, such as newspapers and local radio. This data supports the previous assertion that some property owners may not read local newspapers. Table 7 also shows the clairon minimal use of the municipality's online channels to communicate with citizens.

According to the findings in Table 7, Matjhabeng Local Municipality does not fully utilise e-government because the majority, 62.1% (110) as opposed to 37.9% (67), reported that no online communication was ever used by the Municipality to contact them. One could argue that the municipality's database does not contain the contact information for every taxpayer. As a result, if this is the case, the Municipality should update its taxpayers' contact information and take advantage of the benefits and opportunities provided by m-government to effectively communicate and interact with citizens. As previously stated, nearly half (46%) of respondents advocate for improved communication between the municipality and citizens.

**State of service delivery in the municipality**
The analyses in Table 8 paint a less than enticing picture. The majority of respondents (98.3%) are dissatisfied with the state of service delivery in Matjhabeng Local Municipality, while only 1.7% (3) are pleased. This should be a source of concern for this municipality. Aside from the issues raised earlier in this article about the objection to the new valuation roll and the boycott of the tax increase (Will, 2021(a)), conditions of this nature have the potential to discourage citizens from participating in the municipality's activities.

It has been discovered that there are a number of maleficence that are holding people back and preventing them from participating in the activities of government institutions around the world. For example, UNDP (2018) discovered that people are discouraged by institutions that are "ineffective, unjust, exclusive, corrupt, unaccountable, and/or unresponsive; and/or by-laws, policies, and budgets that are inequitable, discriminatory, or regressive". This observation backs up the views of Ile et al. (2012), which were discussed earlier in this study, that misgivings held by parties involved in municipalities can be detrimental and should be thoroughly addressed for policy ownership.

To that end, it is becoming increasingly important that the Matjhabeng Local Municipality improves its citizens' perceptions of service delivery by becoming more responsive and accelerating services in order to improve the citizens' lives, particularly the disadvantages. As previously stated, this could help to build sufficient support for municipal policies in the future, including the drafting of rate policies.

Conclusions

Countries all over the world have begun to capitalise on the opportunities presented by the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of communication, interaction, and service delivery. Without a doubt, South Africa is part of these developments. As a result, there is no reason for Matjhabeng Local Municipality to put off taking advantage of the opportunities provided by mobile phones. Matjhabeng Local Municipality, as the government closest to the people, should consider how to "not leave anyone behind" and work to meet the Sustainable Development Goals.

Despite the fact that the study focused on public participation during the draft of Matjhabeng Local Municipality's valuation policy, the findings and discussions show that the Municipality should do more to ensure that no one is left behind. Based on the recommendations, it is clear that the use of m-government in Matjhabeng Local Municipality can be a panacea during Covid-19 restrictions and even beyond. As a result, considering how future developments pertaining to this viewpoint could unfold, the Municipality would have to consider the processes and underlying policies for the implementation of m-government and begin to work on such.

In terms of study limitations, only 200 questionnaires were distributed to house owners in this municipality, which was clearly insufficient. As previously discussed, the study focused on Welkom and its surroundings. However, this article believes that it provides a picture to this municipality and that its recommendations could help to avoid the consequences of Covid-19 on public participation in the future.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all respondents in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Gilbert, P. (2019). SA smartphone penetration now at over 80%, says ICASA. Available at: https://www.itweb.co.za/content/GxwQDM1AYy8MIPVo (Accessed on 05 May 2021).


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