

STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTION OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES IN THE BEKKERSDAL TOWNSHIP

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates community stakeholder perceptions of the local government stakeholder engagement practices in the Bekkersdal Township, south of Johannesburg. Bekkersdal Township has experienced a number of violent service delivery protests in recent years, and has been labelled, by a specialised local government data and intelligence organisation called Municipal IQ, a service delivery protest hotspot in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. It is therefore essential to obtain a better and clearer picture of stakeholders' perceptions of the local government stakeholder engagement practices because the community's perceptions influence behaviour and consequently shape the relationships between stakeholders and the municipality.

The research used focus groups to establish stakeholders' perceptions of the local government's stakeholder engagement practices. The findings reveal that the overall perception of the stakeholders of the municipality's stakeholder engagement practices is not favourable and that stakeholders feel that they have been left out of and are not involved in local government activities as a result of the prevailing communication practices of local government.

KEYWORDS

stakeholder engagement, participation, strategic communication, government communication, local government, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Stakeholder engagement is considered essential to the success of a local government. Numerous factors, including poor service delivery, corruption and poor stakeholder engagement practices, result in local government in South Africa generally grappling with maintaining good relationships with the communities it is supposed to serve. Dawkins (2013:284) observes that, in order to distribute the benefits of any organisation fairly, substantive input from stakeholders is paramount, suggesting, therefore, that stakeholder engagement should be at the centre of operations in local government. Stakeholder engagement can create better communication, build trust and enhance overall service delivery outcomes (Department of Health & Human Services, (2011:3). Yet, according to The State of Local Government in South Africa Report CoGTA (2009:4), some of the challenges facing local government are the lack of strategic stakeholder engagement and communication with communities.

This study investigates community stakeholder perceptions of the local government engagement practices in the Bekkersdal Township. Bekkersdal Township, situated in the Rand West City Local Municipality (previously known as the Westonaria Local Municipality) is one of the townships of the Gauteng Province that have witnessed frequent violent protests since 2005, the latest being in March 2015 (Fakir, 2014:5). Mashamaite (2014:235) states that communities such as Bekkersdal have since been labelled as hotspots for violent service delivery protests. Such events are an indication that the relationships between the community and the local municipality are strained. In order to reduce the level of tension between Rand West City Local Municipality and the community, Glaser & Denhardt (2000:51) argue that an improved understanding of stakeholders' perceptions of local government communication is essential since the community's perceptions influence the community's behaviour. The municipality and the community of Bekkersdal, municipal officials and local political leaders (councillors and the mayor) need to have a better understanding of how the community of Bekkersdal perceives government stakeholder engagement practices and, consequently, local government communication.

The objective of this qualitative research is to establish the of the community members' perceptions of the current engagement practices in the local government.

The research questions are:

RQ1. What are the current stakeholder engagement practices of the Westonaria Municipality?

RQ2. To what extent do the municipality's stakeholder engagement practices meet the Bekkersdal community's expectations?

RQ3. Does the Westonaria Local Municipality apply the best stakeholder engagement practices as identified in the literature?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical foundations of stakeholder engagement can be traced in stakeholder theory, which was made popular by Freeman's 1984 Strategic Management book (Freeman, Wicks, & Parmar, 2004; Parmar, Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Purnell & De Colle, 2010). Korschun (2015:613) states that the assumption of stakeholder theory is that organisations are made up of a nexus of actors, termed stakeholders, responsible for providing resources required for the organisation to thrive. The stakeholder theory puts emphasis on explaining and predicting how an organisation functions with regard to relationships and influences existing in its environment (Rowley 1997:887). The organisation needs to consider the interests of all the groups affected by the organisation (Mellahi & Wood, 2003:185). Stakeholder theory was initially developed to guide the behaviour of business managers but it is applicable to all types of organisations, including local government.

Local government stakeholders may include other government entities and private agencies, institutions, organised labour and the community. What is sometimes seen as a relatively monolithic group, termed a community stakeholder, is in fact a complex web of manifold layers of relations with the local government. Community members are multiple stakeholders of municipalities and include voters, citizens, consumers and partners (Draai & Taylor, 2009: 115). In addition, different age groups face different issues. For instance, there is evidence that youth engagement can benefit municipal programmes, civil society and the democratic processes within the local government (Cohen & Salazar, 2009:6). However, Palmer (2004:369) notes that public service institutions often fail to ascertain appropriate criteria for the classification of stakeholders and their significance to the specific issue.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Stakeholder engagement refers to the process whereby an organisation initiates open, two-way communication or dialogue in seeking understanding of and solutions to issues of mutual concern with stakeholders (Office of Government Commerce, 2006:2). Community stakeholder engagement means working collaboratively with and through various groups affiliated by geographic proximity, particular interests or similar situations regarding the issues affecting them (The Department of Health and Human Services, 2011:6).

There is a wide range of arguments for greater stakeholder engagement in local government because effective stakeholder engagement can add value to both the organisation and stakeholders. Greenwood (2007:315) postulates that the more the municipality engages with stakeholders, the more accountable and responsible it is towards stakeholders. Glaser and Denhardt (2000:50) suggest that government must improve its stakeholder engagement methods if there is to be meaningful change in citizen–government relations. Furthermore, Overton-de Klerk and Oelofse (2010:388) concur that continuous involvement of the community as stakeholders, including the dissenting voices, could be important for developing trust and building accountability.

For the stakeholders, some of the benefits of engagement include the opportunity to contribute as specialists in their field to policy and programme development, to have their issues heard and to participate in the decision-making process. Meanwhile, for the organisation, the benefits include improved information flow through tapping into local knowledge and having the opportunity to test policy initiatives or proposals with stakeholders (State Government Victoria, 2011:2). Previous research on government communication has revealed that communities are likely to accept difficult decisions taken by leaders if the decision-making processes are responsive and accountable to citizens (French, 2011:254).

Stakeholder engagement in public organisations enables better-planned and more informed administration policies, by-laws, projects, programmes and local government services (State Government Victoria, 2011:2). Molepo, Maleka and Khalo (2015), as well as Herriman (2011) stress the importance of community engagement in creating good service delivery standards. This is particularly important in the case of local government in South Africa, where poor engagement and communication methods and lack of understanding of stakeholders' concerns are among the many reasons for community protests (Christmas, 2007:7). In terms of social

gains, stakeholder engagement practices can propel a society from procedural democracy to substantive democracy.

Stakeholder engagement can be achieved only through the application of effective communication (Sebola, 2017:26). According to Smith and Ansett (2011:5), engagement refers to the new approach to government communication, which focuses on dialogue with the unions, civil society, pressure groups and other community organisations. In order for stakeholder engagement to be effective, there must be a conscious effort on the part of the elite to engage the public (Draai & Taylor, 2009:113).

Engagement requires honest, transparent and open dialogue with all stakeholders (Baker, Addams & Davis, 2005; Fairbanks, Plowman & Rawlins, 2007; French, 2011) through inclusive and interactive forums where dialogue can be initiated by either party (Dawkins, 2014). The issues of engagement should be relevant and important, adding value to stakeholders (French, 2011; Smith & Ansett 2011). Local government should be open to diverse community initiatives even if they differ from the official government views (Masango, 2009: 126; Kaptein & Van Tulder, 2003:208). Engagement allows participants to learn new perspectives, to seek mutual understanding and to be able to identify progressive solutions which lead to action (French, 2011:255). Furthermore, Dawkins (2014) argues that stakeholder engagement can be effective only if power asymmetries are reduced, if either side can potentially succeed in the dispute and if either party has an impact on distributive outcomes.

Thus stakeholder engagement is different from organisational message transmission, lobbying, constituency relations, opinion survey or convincing a group to agree with the organisation's position.

The nature of service delivery protests, non-payment of municipal services, community policing forums and various community cooperatives demonstrate a number of initiatives that people undertake outside of the government (Vos, 2009:364), which can be interpreted as a community effort to overcome power imbalances in their relationships with the local government. Communities can organise themselves around common causes affecting them through traditional methods and technological platforms such as social media (Eaton, 2013:6). These community initiatives are termed "hands-on democracy" by the Public Information and Communications Service (2013). Thus, protest actions can be seen as an attempt to correct local government's lack of responsiveness to citizens' expectations.

Draai and Taylor (2009:114) state that stakeholder engagement involves decision making, implementation of programmes, monitoring and evaluation of the programmes and sharing the benefits of development. However, local government should involve people not only in the stage of policy planning, but also in the stage of agenda setting, policy implementation and crisis management Public Information and Communications Service (2013).

Stakeholder engagement requires time, allocation of resources and commitment from officials, managers and political leaders (Fairbanks *et al.*, 2007:24; Julnes & Johnson, 2011:223). Furthermore, stakeholder engagement is a complex competency to be created by organisations and managers heading organisations such as municipalities (Aakhus & Bzdak, 2015:188). Sebola (2017:29) and Mayekiso *et al.* (2013:195) highlight various limitations to effective communication in South Africa, such as language barriers, geographical distance and lack of other resources on the part of the community. Political interference and red tape (Mokaeane, Moloï & Oksiutycz, 2016:389) negatively influence local municipalities' abilities to communicate with their stakeholders. Equally, municipality officials' lack of skills and understanding of the processes, corruption and waste of public resources or, indeed, lack of resources, limit the effectiveness of engagement.

Stakeholder engagement can be described in four levels of stakeholder participation. Through these levels, practitioners can determine an organisation's existing stakeholder engagement situation (Centre for the Study of Social Policy, 2013:11; Larson & Williams, 2009:265). The first level is *inform*. Inform is a one-way form of communication where the organisation makes announcements, issues press statements and uses prepared speaking notes. It can be used when the organisation reports decisions or a certain course of action that does not affect the broader group of stakeholders. The second level is *consult*; in this level the organisation presents information to stakeholders and receives feedback. The third level is *involve*, where there is authentic involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of projects emerging from their inputs, but this involvement does not include formal decision-making power. The last level is *collaborate/empower*, where stakeholders are part of decision making in the organisation. It is a longer and more complex process requiring thorough preparation and support for stakeholder involvement.

Various government documents acknowledge the importance of stakeholder engagement by the municipalities (e.g. Municipal Structures Act 117 (1998); The White Paper on Local Government (1998:25). However, although participation and engagement are recognised as

essential democratic processes, they do not often translate into actual effective engagement (Sebola, 2017). Lack of meaningful engagement with the community has both practical and political outcomes for the local government (Palmer, 2004: 368).

Stakeholder engagement overlaps with public participation, which is understood as a two-way exchange of information (Malepo *et al.*, 2015: 346) between citizens and decision makers through the structures designed to involve interest groups, individual citizens and local government structures in the exchange of information (Napier, 2008: 164). Typical forms of public engagement are public hearings, public meetings, advisory committees, public deliberation forums and executive outreach programmes (Mayekiso *et al.*, 2013: 195). However, this approach notably excludes many other forms of communication, such as digital communication or mass media communication. The Internet and social media help to facilitate new engagement methods and make it easy for like-minded people to find each other online (Gilpin *et al.*, 2010:259; Public Information and Communications Service, 2013). Social media platforms offer an opportunity for continuous interaction and for keeping up to date (Cunningham, 2010:114) but are rarely used by the local government. In addition, established channels of communication, such as television, newspapers and word of mouth, are still relevant but not always used to their full potential (The State Services Commissioner, 2010:3).

METHODOLOGY

This exploratory research adopted a qualitative research approach. The qualitative research method has been recognised as a valuable method in the social sciences and in management studies and policy-oriented research (Srivasta & Thomson, 2009:73).

The focus group discussions were used to collect data. The participants were grouped into four relatively homogeneous groups with common characteristics and interests. The first group comprised general members of the community (G1), group two (G2) included community activists, while the youth between the ages of 18 and 25 formed group three (G3) and faith-based participants constituted group four (G4). Each focus group was comprised of six individuals.

The discussion guide was used in facilitating the focus groups' interactions. Although the discussion guide is supposed to be structured in a logical sequence (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011:141), respondents were allowed to raise issues as this would allow a fluid discussion. An

electronic recording device was used to record the discussions; each of the four groups was recorded for between 45 and 60 minutes. The recordings were then transcribed for data analysis purposes. Following transcription, some transcripts where vernacular languages were used were then translated to English. At the end of the group discussion, members were given an opportunity to ask the researcher any questions about the research.

Thematic analysis was utilised for analysing the collected data. Thematic analysis is a type of qualitative analysis that is most appropriate for any research seeking to discover through interpretation (Ibrahim, 2012:40). The first step in performing analysis involved transcribing the audio records. The next step was the careful reading and re-reading of the data, followed by identification of all the data that related to the already classified codes. The main purpose of coding was to identify the pattern in the data. Coding helped to categorise the data with the aim of framing them as theoretical perception (Miles & Huberman, 1994:11-12).

The next step was to combine and catalogue the emerging codes into sub-themes. Themes, in this case, refer to units derived from the conversations, feelings, recurring activities, slang language, vocabulary and proverbs used during the discussions. Sub-themes that emerged from participants' stories were grouped together to form a comprehensive report of their collective experience. The last step in performing thematic analysis was to build a reasonable argument for selecting a theme. This was done by relating a theme to the relevant academic literature.

The researchers ensured that the participation was voluntary and explained the purpose of the research and the risks associated with it. The anonymity of the respondents was protected in reporting the findings and the participants were also requested not to disclose the content of the discussion to third parties.

THE RESULTS

Research participants are concerned that the municipality is not engaging broadly and that the Westonaria municipality's communication approach does not filter-in stakeholder engagement principles. The following themes were identified from the research:

THEME 1: LACK OF MEANINGFUL DIALOGUE WITH THE COMMUNITY

The stakeholder engagement principles highlighted by the literature are stakeholder involvement, stakeholder dialogue and open two-way communication seeking an

understanding of and solutions to issues of mutual concern with stakeholders (Office of Government Commerce, 2006; Smith & Ansett, 2011). Research participants drew a picture of a municipality that sends information only and does not allow space for dialogue on municipal management issues. The frequent theme in the discussion was the lack of stakeholder dialogue in the communication machinery of the municipality. Dialogue with stakeholders goes a long way in creating seamless management of a local government. Dialogue can be understood as a structured interactive discussion where one party listens to the other and there is a proactive process aimed at establishing sustainable engagement strategies with the community (Greenwood, 2007:315). Therefore, an organisation that chooses to engage in dialogue, to listen to stakeholders' contributions and to show a commitment to learning from its stakeholders demonstrates respect for stakeholders (Kaptein & Van Tulder, 2003:210). However, research participants are concerned about the lack of dialogue in their community. In group one, which comprised general members of the community, participant one (G1 P1), for instance, made this statement:

We just see things happening without being engaged, we only get to know after, which is why most of the time there are fights here in Bekkersdal.

A similar sentiment was echoed by G2 P8 (group two included Bekkersdal community activists):

The municipality only informs us after they have concluded on the service by themselves, even now they have informed us that the school is going to be constructed at Coal Three; we don't have any say.

G3 P1 further affirmed this (group three was made up of the youth between the ages of 18 and 25):

There is not truth, they don't want to listen to us.

G4 P6 (group four was composed of individuals from faith-based organisations) agreed:

The municipality don't come to us to listen to our complaints.

And lastly, G1 P4 made a similar observation:

We only get told after things have been done, they only tell us that R30 million has been spent on road construction, for example.

Participants argue that the municipality's failure to take cognisance of what is being communicated stirs up the community's anger and eventually leads to protests in Bekkersdal. Moreover, discussion in group G3 revealed that many young voices are excluded from community-building processes. Consequently, this widens the gap of miscommunication with the municipality. Unavailability of information and lack of dialogue is exactly what group G3 raised as their dissatisfaction with the municipality's communication approach. The youth are concerned that, even though there is an office of the Youth Coordinator in the municipal office, there is no inclusive dialogue with the broader community of the youth of Bekkersdal.

Lack of stakeholder dialogue on local government matters also came to the fore in the discussion with Focus Group 4. One participant asked the researcher one question three times:

What can be done so that the municipality is able to work with us?

This demonstrated how uninvolved the community feels. It also showed how passionately the participant feels about community engagement on issues of local government administration. Stakeholder engagement principles suggest that the involvement of stakeholders, even if their views differ from those of the municipality's leadership, is an important consideration in governance discourse. Moreover, the Constitution and local government policy papers encourage the involvement of communities and community groups in facilitating service delivery. Focus Group 4 participants believe the quarterly reporting practice by councillors is inefficient and not frequent enough and is made even worse by the failure of councillors to come and report to the community by the end of that quarter. This is remarked on by participant 1 in Group 4 (G4 P1):

In most cases councillors wait for these three months and when they see that the community is quiet they don't even come to the community; their communication is quite poor.

The common theme that emerges from this discussion is that the community is not engaged on governance issues, and that the community is not being listened to. The municipal leadership ought to be cognisant of the importance of including stakeholders' insights, of the pressing

need to accommodate the voices of disadvantaged and powerless stakeholders, of the stakeholders' right to be informed and to express their opinions on substantial decisions made by the local government, and lastly, of the principle of fairness or equity. These are key values added by stakeholder dialogue in the organisation (Baker *et al.*, 2005, French, 2012). The lack of stakeholder dialogue, as suggested by participants, contributes to lack of trust from the community.

THEME 2: LIMITED SCOPE AND SELECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Research participants feel that political factions and ethnic divisions tend to play a major role in determining communication flow at the Westonaria Municipality. Participants' insights reveal an organisation riddled by political mismanagement, divided along ethnic lines and political factions and indifferent to engaging the broader community on governance issues. The municipality's behaviour, characterised by a selective communication approach based on political and ethnic divisions, contradicts government communication theorists such as Fairbanks *et al.* (2007), Andrews, Cowell, Downe, Martin & Turner (2008); Herriman (2011) and the Public Information and Communication Services' (2013) perspectives on government communication, suggesting that there has been a global trend to encourage broader stakeholder participation in making decisions over local developments, and that local municipalities are offering a greater range and number of communication initiatives.

A dominant narrative among participants is that councillors inform only those people close to them when the municipality plans to roll out projects, and if there are employment opportunities. This was noted, for instance, by G1 P6:

A case in point for example, the Zivuseni Project, community members were complaining about it because they never get informed of how it came about; it was just communicated to ward councillors and councillors recruited their close friends. They would go from their close ties appointing people for the project; we are employed because our mothers are known otherwise we would not be working. It was never openly communicated to the community.

Participants argued that information is aligned along certain groups in the community and channelled to the select few based on political factions, ethnic groups and family networks.

G1 P2, for example, expressed a similar view:

Communication is among councillors and their groups; if you are not known then you don't get informed. In order for an ordinary member of the community to know the latest developments she/he would need to know someone within the municipality.

G3 P4 was of the same opinion as G1 P2:

If that councillor is Xhosa, only Xhosa speaking are going to get informed of that.

G3 P1 was in agreement with the view of these participants quoted above:

We don't even get informed if there are free groceries; you just get it on the same day. The information flows [between] selected individuals on WhatsApp.

The faith-based group also highlighted the issue of selective communication. They pointed out that, although some of them are told of how difficult it is for the municipality to get land for allocation of church sites, others among the faith organisations are engaged differently, as argued by G4 P6:

There are pastors who are getting no information then there are those pastors leading big churches but not known by Bekkersdal residents and, surprisingly, they have all the information.

THEME 3: INADEQUATE COMMUNICATION METHODS

The municipality uses limited, out-dated and inefficient communication platforms. The communication platforms utilised by the Westonia Municipality, such as the loudhailer, posters and community meetings, seem to be inappropriate for the community of Bekkersdal; research participants frequently complained about the use of the loudhailer in sending out key messages that need formal engagement forums. Moreover, participants are not happy that the messages are usually communicated by loudhailer only the night before an important meeting takes place. G1 P4, for instance, commented that even meetings about the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) are poorly advertised:

Even the IDP meeting is not well communicated in the community; you find that when one passes by the street there is a big tent; when one asks what is happening, municipal

representatives will tell you there is an IDP meeting the following day; [while we are asleep] at around 10:00 pm then a loudhailer will move around the streets announcing the IDP meeting taking place the following day.

Participants are concerned that such an approach limits attendance at meetings since community members may have prior commitments. It therefore does not allow enough stakeholder engagement opportunity nor does it facilitate the broader community engagement required before the sitting of such an important meeting in local government.

Research participants also do not believe that posters are used effectively to access the broader community, citing the municipality's use of posters as a matter of procedure, not a genuine attempt to reach out to the community, as suggested by G1 P6:

You found that posters are placed there at the municipal offices, not here in Bekkersdal, so it means the municipality uses posters as a procedure because they would know exactly, if, for example, they [are] communicating about vacancies, who they want to hire.

Research participants drew a picture of an unresponsive local government. Participants are disparaging even of the loudhailer technique, saying it is used only when the municipality sees that there are protests in the township. G2 P2, for instance, pointed out that lack of engagement generates violent protests:

The municipality is not communicating effectively with the community, unless there are protests; then they wake up, if the community is not making anything to force the municipality to come here then they don't come.

G4 P2 concurred with this assessment:

In order for the municipality to communicate with the people, we need to protest first then the municipality takes a step to engage the community; besides that they don't communicate with the community. You can physically go to the municipal office and seek for help, [but] you will come back without any assistance; our municipality is poor, very poor.

This is corroborated by G3 P3:

For any engagement to occur, we need to act; other than that, nothing happens.

Consistent with the strategic communication and stakeholder engagement theories discussed, the communication platforms used in Bekkersdal, such as loudhailers and posters, can play a useful role in making important information available to the community but they do little to promote community inclusion in governance. The literature on stakeholder engagement principles suggests that the local government should try to engage members of the community as broadly as possible, taking care to include those with differing voices (Baker *et al.*, 2005; Dawkins, 2014; Masango, 2009). The communication platforms listed above are not the only ones used by the Westonaria Municipality. However, these are the ones that the research participants were aware of. The Westonaria Communication Strategy (2014/2015:9), for example, listed, among other platforms, magazines, a website, izimbizo, seminars and dialogues, workshops, stakeholder meetings and summits.

THEME 4: ENGAGING A WIDE SPECTRUM OF STAKEHOLDERS AS WAY OF CREATING TRUST IN THE MUNICIPALITY

If the municipality wants to turn around the community's problems in Bekkersdal, it has to start working with various sections of the community such as church leaders. These were the sentiments of one of the research participants from Focus Group 4, which was comprised of individuals from faith-based groups. Involvement of stakeholders ensures that municipal services meet stakeholders' needs, and that stakeholders are able to recognise and communicate any need for service enhancement to the officials (Herriman, 2011:6).

Involving stakeholders cannot be equated to allowing citizens to be involved in the day-to-day management of municipal operations but it could include allowing stakeholders to have a say in how services should be designed and delivered. One research participant, G4 P6, suggested a way in which the municipality should go about involving stakeholders on local governance issues:

I think they can bring pastors close to the council, although not as councillors, but to play [a] similar role with regard to coordination of faith issues; this would help because municipal officials do not know Bekkersdal.

What also emerged from the conversation with participants is that the municipality does involve stakeholders in local government service-related issues, but only a certain category of stakeholders.

The White Paper on Local Government (1998:25) stipulates that councillors should promote the involvement of citizens and community formations in the design and delivery of municipal programmes, which is in contrast with the stakeholders' experience of the municipality's leadership as described by research participants.

In the discussion on how the Bekkersdal community is involved in what the Westonaria Municipality does, one participant, G1 P2, highlighted the lop-sided involvement of stakeholders by the municipality:

Let us say for argument sake, I am from Zivuseni political party. As soon as I ascend to the office, I need to involve every member of the community not only Zivuseni party members or individuals, certain group[s] or a certain tribe.

The Municipal Structures Act 117 (1998:14) further accentuates the involvement of the community. Most importantly, the municipality should not just involve the community but should also, through the council, annually review its processes for involving the community and its service delivery mechanism for meeting the needs of the community. Throughout the discussion with participants, none suggested a municipality-community initiative that tries to involve the broader stakeholders in engagement processes. According to participants, the municipality is an organisation that is aloof and concerned only with revenue collection. G2 P5, for instance, lamented that communication took place only when votes were being solicited:

One thing about the Westonaria Municipality is that it does not work with the community, but when it's election time they come and communicate with people, promising them things such as reducing municipal rates bills, giving people jobs and so on and on. Once they are elected they forget about the community.

The stakeholder engagement practice derives its effectiveness and legitimacy from solving stakeholders' problems, and if that is not achieved then stakeholders will always complain (Baker *et al.*, 2005:490). The participants in this research bear testimony to this. For instance, G4 P6 agreed with the sentiment expressed by G2 P5:

The municipality does not come to the community, or rather the representatives do not visit the community; they only come when there are fights and community outburst[s].

This is contrary to the assertions of the stakeholder engagement literature that stakeholders need to own the issues, identify the problems, identify action areas, and be part of the planning and implementation of strategies, as well as the evaluation of outcomes (Aakhus & Bzdak, 2015:195). Unfortunately, responses from participants suggested that there is a lack of community involvement in key community projects in Westonaria. G3 P1, for instance, complained that the municipality constructed a gym which is not easily accessible and therefore of little value to the Bekkersdal community.

Lack of community involvement, among other problems, leads to rumours and false stories being spread around. Some participants, for example, mentioned allegations that could not be proved. such as this statement by G3 P1:

The municipality are not honest with us; there was a proof that the municipality have embezzled funds hence you see miscommunication.

Another unproven allegation was mentioned by G4 P1:

We heard that this municipality has no funds. At some stage, the Office of the Public Protector, which is commended by almost everyone for its good work, conducted an investigation here and it never pointed on any corrupt municipal official, but we hear that funds were misused by the municipality and there is none left.

G1 P8 echoed this opinion:

They discuss tenders among themselves, but maybe we are just assuming, but I think they finish all the processes among themselves and perhaps agree about bribes. They [are] not working for the community; they do favours for their brothers.

Scholars and practitioners of stakeholder engagement advise that, for the local government to counter such community perceptions, it needs to open up the policymaking and implementation processes through greater community involvement and produce results that are meaningful to the community (Fakir, 2014:20; Madison, 2011:1; Fairbanks *et al.*, 2007:24). The participants' stories lead to the conclusion that there is a missing link in the engagement practice of the

municipality. In communities such as Bekkersdal, recognition by the political leadership is necessary and symbolises a first step towards being heard as citizens.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research questions were answered as follows:

RQ1 Forms of communication used by local government

The municipality uses a very limited number of communication tools, and its communication, in the view of community, is ineffective. Even though the communication strategy document of Westonaria Municipality refers to numerous communication platforms (Westonaria Communication Strategy (2014/2015:9), the research participants seemed to be aware of only three, namely posters, loud-hailing and public meetings. The research established that stakeholders are not content with the way these platforms are utilised. With regard to the use of posters, for example, research participants complained that posters are not placed in positions where they will be easily accessible; instead, they are placed at the municipal office in Westonaria. The loudhailer is also used to communicate messages that ought to be communicated in an open meeting and does not necessarily reach all the important corners of the township. It also emerged that meetings are not convened for the purpose of consulting with the stakeholders but, in most instances, merely to inform them about something that has already been decided. In addition, participants identified selective communication as one of the issues crippling the engagement efforts.

RQ2 Community expectation of the stakeholder engagement

The research found that the expectations of the community are that the municipality should engage them on issues affecting them as stakeholders and should not make decisions without consulting them. There is a widespread outcry from participants for stakeholder consultation in the planning and implementation of projects, most importantly, projects within the Bekkersdal Township. Research participants feel the municipality is not meeting their expectations in this regard and therefore they unleash their anger through protests. In addition, there are perceptions of nepotism, favouritism and a general lack of professionalism among the municipality officials. Moreover, participants suggest that transparency needs to be one of the

aspirations of the municipality in the stakeholder engagement exercise because it inspires trust among stakeholders.

RQ 3 Applying the best engagement practices

Bekkersdal residents feel alienated from the actions of their local government. The research has established that there is a need for community involvement and engagement on key issues of service affecting the community. There is also a feeling that municipal employees are not engaging professionally and respectfully when interacting with the community. Participants feel they are often left out of decisions on issues that directly affect their wellbeing, such as the construction of a new public school in their neighbourhood. Different stakeholder groupings feel the municipality should collaborate with them in planning and communicating such initiatives. The community also feels that the municipality's communication lacks openness, relevance and transparency. Meaningful stakeholder engagement has various stages: inform, consult, involve and empower (Centre for Study of Social Policy, 2013); however, in the view of the community, the municipality barely adequately addresses the first step: to inform.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this study are exploratory and further research with even broader representation of the Bekkersdal community would be beneficial for a better understanding of the community views on engagement practice in the Rand West City Local Municipality.

CONCLUSION

In principle, the government recognises stakeholder engagement as a powerful mechanism for bringing about environmental and behavioural change to improve government communication with the community. However, despite well outlined principles, government acknowledges that implementing these principles is not always effective. The research conducted in the Bekkersdal community indicates that the local municipality's engagement practices do not correspond to the best practice standards outlined in the literature. The municipality uses ineffective methods of communication, rarely consults the community on issues and decisions of importance and does not conform to the dialogical principles of stakeholder engagement. Such practices perpetuate the mistrust between the municipality and the stakeholders and result in periodic protests that reflect the community's dissatisfaction with the municipality. This

research recommends that the Rand West City Local Municipality institute a meaningful stakeholder engagement process.

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