ENHANCING DEMOCRACY THROUGH PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A REVIEW

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Abstract

The public participation process is deemed essential as it enhances partnerships between the government and citizens during the decision-making process. This study perused the meaning and merits of public participation, and how democracy could be enhanced through the public participation process during COVID-19 pandemic. The Democratic Decision-Making Theory and the Technological Acceptance Model underpinned the study. These theories highlighted the need to include the citizens in the decision-making process and the relevance of the South African government to support and educate the public on the usefulness of adopting information science to achieve effective governance, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative study was applied in this study and data were collected from secondary sources such as articles, government legislation, textbooks, and the Internet. Major findings depict that public participation involves a process by which the parliament and provincial legislatures refer to the citizens, individuals, government entities, and concerned organisations in the decision-making process to achieve good governance. The public participation process establishes partnerships and relationships, promotes addressing the needs of the citizens, and enhances the collective decision-making process. It was discovered that numerous communication dynamics could be used to enhance public participation process during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies from several scholars further revealed that electronic media is the most effective communication dynamics to be applied in the public participation process during the COVID-19 pandemic and these include Short Message Service (SMS), WhatsApp group messages, Facebook messages, Electronic mail (e-mail), and Zoom virtual presentations. The study recommends that the South African government should apply a mix of these electronic media options in the public participation process to enhance democracy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Public participation; Democracy; Communication dynamics; COVID-19; South Africa.

1.1 Introduction

Democracy is enhanced through public participation by creating platforms for the public to be heard through several means of communication. Public participation refers to a collaborative process where provincial stakeholders gather and involve in a dialogue with the principal aim of resolving issues of the province (Kandil, 2016). Public participatory process encompasses a community government engagement that involves educating the people and holding various discussions in policy-making before a political decision is made. Quick and Bryson (2016) uphold that a central component of effective public participation is the potential for the stakeholders to allow the citizens to participate mutually in governance decisions. It is the role of the public to exercise their rights by making valuable inputs to strengthening democracy during the decision-making processes as enshrined in the constitution. The public's position in the public participation process is a constitutional necessity and it is anticipated that the provincial legislature in South Africa should adhere to this obligation by contacting the communities through various media options (Public Participation Framework PPA, 2013).

The National Public Participation Model (NPPM) which was established through the legislative sector informs the public participation in the Provincial Legislatures. Sections 118 of South African Constitution (106 of 1996) creates the fundamentals of this model and the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) (2015) affirms that it is a prerequisite that public participation platforms are established to enhance democracy. Communication remains one of humanity's most important foundations as it provides a forum for people to communicate and exchange information for vital purposes. The significance of communication has been recognized by human race having gone through its evolutionary process on how individuals send and receive information. As constitutionally demanded in South Africa, the legislative arm of the government interacts with the public sector consistently for a participatory process to achieve an inclusive governance. This notion of reaching out to the public by the stakeholders is enhanced through various mass media options.

The development of public participation models in some provinces in South Africa has been a difficult task, thus hindering the means of reaching the citizenry and impeding the prospects of interaction for effective decision-making process. However, reasonable efforts have been made by the legislature to engage the public and give feedbacks but these measures seem unproductive due

to incessant public protests. This study examines the meaning of public participation process, the merits of public participation in enhancing democracy in South Africa and the communication dynamics to enhance the public participation process during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.2   Theoretical background

The Democratic Decision-Making Theory and the Technological Acceptance Model (TAM) underpins this study.

Democratic Decision-Making Theory

The Democratic Decision-Making Theory emphasizes the need for leaders to allow members of society to take active participation in the decision-making process (Holman, 2010). The Democratic Decision-Making Theory is the opposite of autocratic leadership style where leaders willingly dictate the shape of administration. Ulrich and Wenzel (2019) affirm that in Democratic Decision-Making Theory, leaders agree to fairness, equity, equality, and transparency in the process of administration. Although the democratic decision-making style seems straightforward, the process is deemed complex, as it can be a difficult task to bring groups of people from different socio-cultural backgrounds together and make them agree on a single matter. McCallister (2019) affirms that the process involved in a democratic decision-making style involves evaluating situations and developing options, scheduling meetings for agreement, assigning an advocate for each option, hold reasonable debates with delegates on each option, and voting for options or agree on each concept raised. In the view of Ulrich and Wenzel (2019), democratic decision-making competence depicts progress where people are involved in questioning the stakeholders' decisions rather than confirming their decisions. Democratic competence in this case depicts the maintenance of the lasting potentials of democracy. Participatory process in all provinces in South Africa could be enhanced through the adoption of Democratic Decision-Making Theory by allowing the voice of the masses to be heard in the decision-making process.

Technology Acceptance Model

The Technology Acceptance Model determines the rate of information science by an organization. This theory was developed in 1989 to describe the user behavior through a broad variety of end-user computing technologies and user populations (Davis, 1989). Figure 1 portrays the perceived usefulness and perceived ease of usefulness are the main determinants of information science

acceptance. In the view of Chau (1999), the Technological Acceptance Model improved the belief-attitude-intention-behaviour relationship to accept IT. The TAM model expresses the process by which individuals perceive and adopt the information technology. When individuals perceive that the adoption of a certain system will enhance productivity or performance (perceived usefulness) and would be free from effort (perceived ease of usefulness), the individuals will be left with no option than to adopt the IT option. Rauniar *et al.* (2014) notes that TAM is the preferred choice of models to understand the details about differences in attitude toward accepting technology. The support gained from several theories such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Expectancy Theory, Self-efficacy Theory and other scholarly research findings depict that TAM is influenced by the actual behavioural intention to use a system, which is subjective to its perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Chau, 1999). The prescripts of this theory depicts that the adoption of information science could be used to facilitate participatory democracy and this depends on the perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use by the leaders. It could also be inferred that the negligence to adopt information science is due to ignorance and the inability to understand the expediency of e-governance. However, the perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use is influenced by other external variables such as systems features, training, documentation and support. The application of this theory suggests that the government should support and educate the public on the usefulness of adopting information science to achieve effective governance, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.
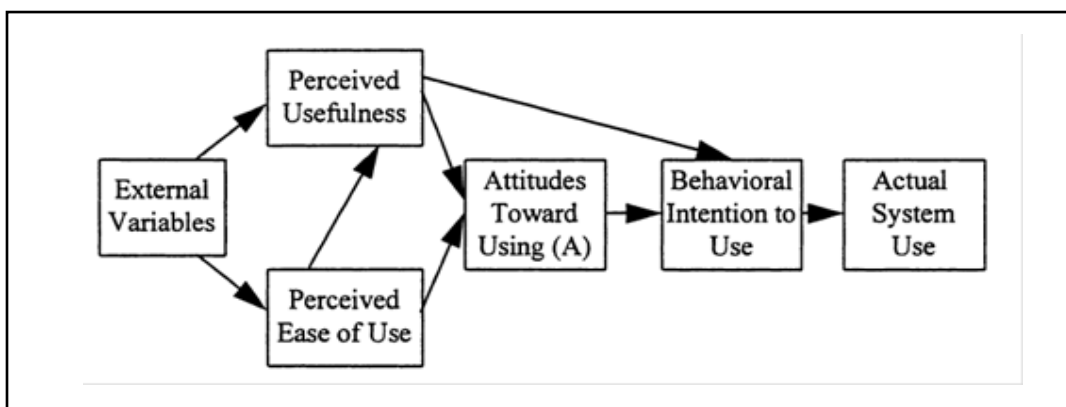
Figure 1:   Technological Acceptance Model (TAM)

Source: Chau (1999)

1.3   South Africa as a democratic nation

After 1994, the emergence of democracy in South Africa brought a landscape for every citizen to be equal before the law across the ethnic lines. The Republic of South African Constitution was promulgated to portray the rights of citizens and to guide civil conduct of the citizens. The Constitution, guided by the human principles, upheld the Bill of Rights as enshrined in Chapter 2 of the South African Constitution (Mbondenyi & Ojienda, 2013). South Africa was then divided into nine provinces, which in turn have nine provincial legislatures regulating the provincial Governments through the National Council of Provinces (NCOP).

The division of powers of the national assembly and provincial parliaments were specified by the South African Constitution and the three arms of government were instituted and entrusted with specific duties to represent the people (Klug, 2019). These arms include the executive/president, legislature/parliament, and judiciary. All provincial legislatures belongs to the arm of government as enshrined in the Constitution. The above-mentioned arms of government conduct the necessary mandates as a Multi-Party State where the constitution is the domain for enhancing democracy. The executive arm of government is responsible for enforcing legislation and ensuring that the public receives the necessary service provisions. The executive has its compulsory public engagement mechanism for consulting on any policy implementation purpose (PPA, 2013).

The duties of the legislature as enshrined in the Republic of South African constitution include lawmaking, public participation, and oversight (Girma, 2012). The legislature is responsible for reviewing legislation enacted by the executive or state for implementation as policy. Throughout the process of concluding the piece of laws that are either created or amended, public participation is essential (PPA, 2013). Public participation refers to a legislative process that requires the legislature to interrelate constantly with the public on various programs to facilitate service delivery (Lafont, 2015). The mechanism of public participation enhances South African democracy peoples' viewpoints are considered. The legislative arm of government further assumes the oversight role to keep the executive responsible for their policy pronouncements; this procedure seeks to ensure that the allocation of the public fund is accounted for and clarified to the legislature to communicate to the public (Carrim, 2010).

The Judiciary is sovereign as enshrined by South African constitution as the agent to enforce laws. This sovereignty is confirmed by Section 165 (Judicial Authority) sub-section 2 of Chapter 8 of

the Constitution of the Republic , which read as follows: "The courts are autonomous and subject to the constitution and rules, which they must apply impartially, without fear, favor or prejudice". The South African provincial legislatures' motives include creating advanced government through participatory democracy to enhance political stability. A structure for public participation and communication policy was developed by the legislative sector through the speaker forum as two distinct strategic documents for improving democratic processes (PPA, 2013). The government's communication mechanisms premised the establishment of the Legislative Sector Communication Strategy Framework (LSCSF), which follows the prescripts of public participation, as well as the structure for the communication policy.

1.4   Public participation

Public participation refers to a process by which the legislature consults with the public, organizations and other government entities before making decisions. Public participation is a multi-dimensional tool for public communication and collective problem-solving mechanism with the goal of making more appropriate decisions (Florida, 2017). Bobbio (2019) sustains that the entire process of public participation must represent an active and cordial relationship between the state and its electorate. Public participation refers to the relationship between state power actors and citizens where each has an equal voice to engage in solving public problems (Kandil, 2016). Lafont (2015) states that public participation is believed to be the most efficient process where all elements of government are involved to effect change toward service delivery. This process enhances comprehensive information gathering, correction of past mistakes, and positive dialogues to alleviate problems facing local communities by collaborating with the members of the community (Blue & Dale, 2016).

Public participation forms a background to enforce pure democracy by including the masses as social actors in national decision-making (Public Participation Framework, 2013). This is further expressed in the Constitution of South Africa 1996 (106 of 2004), Sections 56, 59, 69, 70, 115 and 116, which indicates that the citizens should be actively involved in the decision-making process of the government to ensure transparency, representative governance and to influence the outcomes of government policy. The focus of public participation includes gathering public opinions on legislation to assist in improving decision-making procedures; informing the public

on governance and other relevant topics to promote harmony, and collecting input from the public on their perceptions of service delivery to take corrective action (PPF, 2013).

In Madumo's (2014) view, public participation foster collaboration by bringing people of diverse backgrounds together to bargain for a specific project. Participation in this case depicts that the views of the people should be heard, as well as respected during the process of decision-making (Lafont, 2015; Polletta, 2015). Public participation is seen as a process where the public opinions are considered irrespective of the status quo, also in creating meaningful dialog to achieve a specific objective (Madumo, 2014). Public participation denotes to the mechanism in which the social actors consult with the public before making the required decisions (Public Participation Framework, 2013). In this regard, the success of the ruling class depends on their ability to ensure adequate participatory process, planning, communication, and public relations.

The following section expounds on the process of public participation
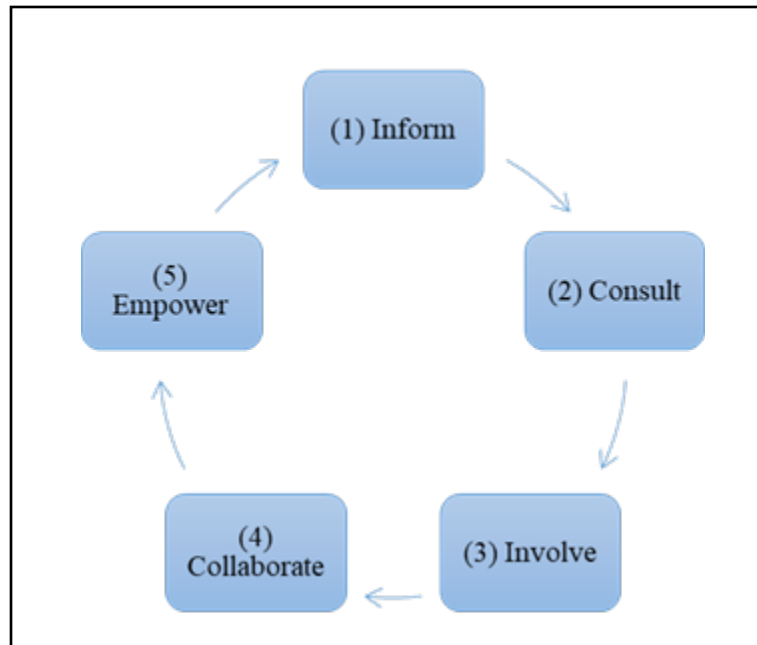
1.4.1 Public participation process

There are several processes that need to be followed in the public participation process. These processes include to inform the public, consult, involve, collaborate, and to empower the public. Kandil (2016) points out that these processes should be adequately followed to ensure a democratic decision-making process. Figure 2 presents the public participation process.

Inform – As depicted in Figure 2, informing the public is the first step in the public participation process and this refers to the process of keeping the public conscious of upcoming projects and thereafter obtaining their unanimous opinions. The leaders in this case, must be open-minded, considerate, and eager enough to consider public feedback in the decision-making process. In addition, it is important to define precisely where feedback from the public is highly required to maximize the full focus on unpleasant matters.

Consult – The second step in the public participation process as portrayed by Figure 2 is consulting the public. To achieve this, public leaders follow due processes to reach out or recognise the variety of stakeholders expected to be included in the decision-making during the participative procedure. The processes involved in this stage include ascertaining the stake holders that would be involved

in the decision-making process, establishing effective relationships, and conducting stakeholder interviews (Kandil, 2016).

Figure 2:   **Public participation process**

Source: Adapted from Kandil (2016)

Involve – After consulting the public, the next step in the participatory process is to include the public actively in the decision-making process. Involving the public in a participation process depicts finding a problem-solving solution for society. Leaders should indicate how many people that should be included in the decision-making process at this stage. However, no definite number of representation in this stage, but members of the public should be allowed to take an active part and express their opinions in the participatory process to achieve success (Kandil, 2016).

Collaborate – This is the fourth stage in Figure 2 and it involves working in partnerships and establishing agreements on how the plans made during the participatory process should be brought to fruition (Madumo, 2014). In this stage, the stakeholders are subdivided into smaller units to achieve suitable collaboration, also creating an enabling environment for dialogue is paramount. The leaders in this case should gather the conclusions from each other and finally merge it to form an all-inclusive summary for performance.

Empower – Empowering the public is the final stage in the participatory process and this occurs after collaborating with the public**.** After the feedback from public engagement has been collected, there is a need to balance input with priorities (Kandil, 2016). This includes the process of bringing to action all that was agreed upon during the public participatory process.

The next section discusses the merits of public participation.

1.4.2   Merits of public participation

Governance excels in a nation where the participatory method is practiced and Mathebula (2016) maintains that this requires obtaining the views of the people before implementing major policies. Mathebula (2016) points out that everyone with a stake in the intervention process has an equal opportunity to be heard and acknowledged in a true public participation process. In the view of Madumo (2011), public participation is an instrument to disseminate and obtain information to the public for the purposes of decision making. Uittenbroek *et al.* (2019) postulates that the public participation process enhances governance and increases democratic acceptability for institutions through stronger relations with citizens. It further enhances credibility for public entities, prospects for active participation and transparency through efficient distribution of information and better debate (Blue & Dale, 2016; Bobbio, 2019).

In the process of reconciling diverse and hostile communities, Cooper and Smith (2012) uphold that public participation process helps in bringing 'hard to reach' and 'disadvantaged' groups into discussions and build relationships within different communities and social groups. As a result of social cohesion, networks are established by allowing different interest groups to work together. In the view of Fuji (2015) and Floridia (2017), public participatory process improves service quality by ensuring that public sector funding is focused on the articulated needs of people, hence decreasing administrative and infrastructural costs by checking the activities of social actors. It also allows quick and meaningful decisions by ensuring collaborations among people of different socio-cultural backgrounds (Lafont, 2015).

Public participatory process facilitates capacity building and learning by increasing the citizens' knowledge on how the public institution works. It allows people to have greater access to the resources they need and knowing the limitations of the different public bodies (Ravazzi & Pomatto, 2014; Marshall, 2016). It further creates job opportunities by recognizing interest groups through

skill acquisition or vocational training of participants included in the participatory process (Mathebula, 2016). According to Walker, McQuarrie, and Lee (2015) public participatory process promotes environmental protection as issues related to the environment are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens. At the national level, each representing individual has adequate access to environmental information of their various local communities and this paves way to partake in proper decision-making processes (Tahvilzadeh, 2015).

While disputes are unavoidable, they are expressly addressed through public discussion and dialog and collaboration with conflicting interest groups (Glucker *et al.,* 2013). Newig *et al*. (2018) state that a consensus could easily be reached through public participation and measures to foster cooperation addressed. Furthermore, Blue and Dale (2016) sustain that the public participation process helps to integrate stakeholders into mainstream public planning and decision-taking, thereby enhancing their knowledge on specific projects. This encourages trust and eliminates opposition groups due to the inclusion of representatives in the decision-making process (Florida, 2017). The involvement of public stakeholders in the early stages of a project can prevent the spread of rumors and the rise of negative perceptions which, once they take root, are very difficult to change (Fuji, 2015).

**1.5   Development communication and communication dynamics to enhance public participation**

Development communication refers to an approach of communication that promotes a change in the entirety of individual behaviors (Bajracharya, 2013). According to Mefalopulos (2008) and Tufte and Mefalopulos (2009), development communication is done to engage stakeholders in society to facilitate progress in the development agenda. While development communication is not just about the change, it is also about sharing problem-solving knowledge between social actors and the public (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development OECD, 2013). Concerning this responsibility, educating the public and raising ambitions to work for growth are interwoven with socio-cultural, economic, and political processes. The functions of development communication include the use of effective means of communication to influence citizens' involvement in development processes, to inform, encourage and educate the rural communities

primarily at the grass root level (Bajracharya, 2013). Developmental communication disperses the information needed, promotes behaviour, and facilitates social change (Mefalopulos 2008).

As part of development, expression of equality before the law, and the exercise of citizens ' rights as enshrined in the South African constitution, 1994 Act 106, the Government of South Africa has established a Government Communication Information Systems (GCIS) that ensures that everyone has the freedom to express their views. Due to the acceptance of this procedure, communities, civil society, business and government can express their opinions, criticize existing policies and propose new ones without hindrance. The promulgation of the GCIS has made enviable contributions to society that has been widely respected. The GCIS is responsible for creating Multi-Purpose Community Centres (MPCCs) and these institutions were designed to provide communities, especially the historically marginalized, with a platform for accessing government information to enhance democracy.

1.5.1   Communication dynamics and public participation

Lunenburg (2010) affirms that the word 'communication' originates from a Latin word 'communis' which depicts a method for sharing needed information between parties. Communication includes the process of passing on the relevant information to the right people at the right time through the appropriate medium (Sauer, 2014). The communication process during the public participation process involves the ability of the ruling class to send messages to the public through appropriate channels and seek input from the public to ensure the process is complete. Communication remains one of humanity's most important foundations, as it provides a forum for the transfer of intellectual capacity through verbal and non-verbal means. The role of communication in changing the cultural imperatives of people has been known much longer than it has been documented for thousands of years (Mathews & Thakkar, 2012). The globe has witnessed a positive growth through the application of communication dynamics over the years and has helped in educating society on how to access knowledge, live, and relate to each other. Figure 2 presents the communication model.
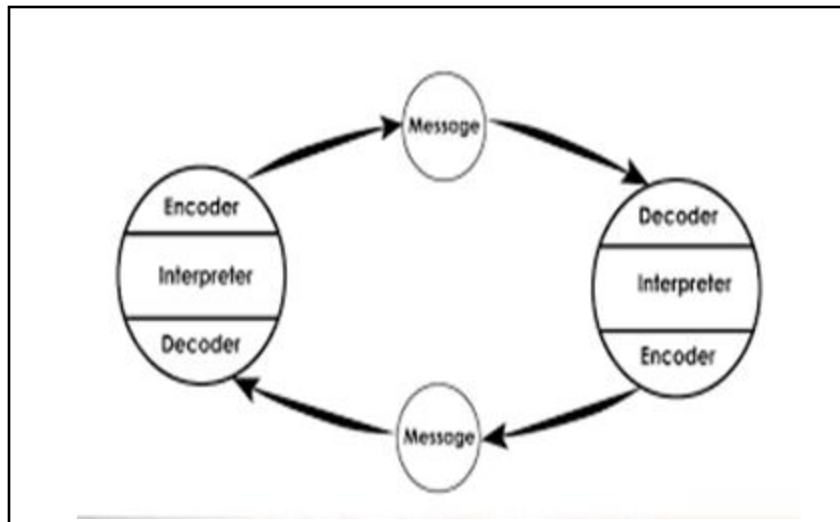
Figure 3:   **Communication model**

Source: Adapted from Lunenburg (2010)

The communication model in Figure 3 depicts that social actors (encoder) initiates the communication process by encoding the chosen messages to the citizens (decoder) through the right medium. The communication process is said to be complete when the decoder receives the messages and sends feedback to the encoder. This, in effect, improves the quality of decisions by anticipating public needs, thereby maintaining integrity and legitimacy, and ultimately promoting democracy.

During the communication process, there are several factors that impede or frustrate the process of effective communication and Eisenberg (2010) describes those factors as obstacles to successful communication. Such barriers are known as process barriers, physical, semantic, and psychosocial barriers. Physical barriers in communication depicts the occurrence of distractions during physical communications; verbal barriers occur when people use words or phrases that can have several meanings to different people; psychosocial barriers occur due to the disparity in experience and psychological distance (Beqiri, 2018). Communication follows a logical process, as depicted in Figure 3 and any failure occurring in the process logically delays the phase of comprehension and response (Lunenburg, 2010). Cheney (2011) suggests that to promote effective communication, the sender and receiver must follow the communication process and this was supported by Keyton (2011) who affirms that the receiver of the message (decoder) should be attentive, relate to the sender, and argue constructively to achieve effective communication. In addition, Keyton (2011) states that in the communication process, social actors should explain the ideas and make the

contact intent brief; understand the physical and human environments, communicate with sub-units and prepare them before participatory phase; be mindful of their tones and techniques to ensure the shared content is not misrepresented; and communicate for proper public understanding while following up on the communication process.

1.5.2 Methods of communication

According to Valentzas and Broni (2011), the two main methods of communication include electronic and print media. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the study focused only on electronic media as a means of communication. Enwereji and Uwizeyimana (2019) affirm that electronic media requires the use of integrated circuit and power to send messages and enable the recipient to access the message. Electronic media, according to Hassan (2012), facilitates immediate sending and receiving of the messages by the communication stakeholders. The different forms of electronic media are expounded below:

Radio programs- This form of electronic media uses only audio means to transfer information to persons in different locations (de Mooij, 2014). Radio sets could be adopted to send messages to stakeholders due to its ability to capture a wider audience in different localities (Meade, 2012). Awareness could be made through radio sets regarding the public participation process and this was confirmed by Familusi and Owoeye (2014) who confirm that radio sets could be used to disseminate information to target audience in the local communities.

Television sets- According to Familusi and Owoeye (2014), television sets are used to disseminate vital information to the target audience and used for educational programmes. Television sets combine both audio and visual messages to send information to the target, which attracts a wide audience (Bird *et al*., 2012; de Mooij, 2014). Television sets could be adopted to disseminate information to the people due to its ability to cover a wider audience without considering educational barriers.

Social media- The use of social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube and Twitter allows the public to disseminate and receive information from diverse sources. Baruah (2012) thinks that social media is cheap and can capture broader coverage. Concerning the use of Facebook, Sauer (2014) affirms that it is used by over one billion people across the globe and has been embraced

in South African context. WhatsApp groups could also be created by social actors to discuss matters of urgent importance. Dialogues could be facilitated using Facebook messenger and WhatsApp groups during the public participation process.

Zoom virtual meetings- These refer to audiovisual Apps that facilitate meetings and Webners, it also provides content sharing and video conferencing presentations (Bernazzani, 2020). Zoom App is recently adopted around the world to facilitate audiovisual teaching and discussions amongst groups. This type of App enhances the quick adoption as people can join anywhere with their mobile Apps or computers and with a powerful meeting security (Bernazzani, 2020). South African leaders could facilitate the public participatory process during the COVID-19 pandemic by adopting zoom meetings to discuss urgent matters for the interest of the public.

Electronic mail- This refers to the application used to send individual or bulk messages to the target audience. Bothma *et al.* (2008) and Sauer (2014) confirm that electronic mail (email) are the safest way to send mails to a wide number of people due to its ability to quickly transmit messages. In the view of USAID (2013), electronic mails are cheap and affordable, also messages sent through this medium are received instantly. Democracy in South Africa could be enhanced by adopting e-mails as one of the options to facilitate public participatory process.

1.6   Conclusion

This study focused on the measures to enhance democracy through public participation process during COVID-19 pandemic. The objectives that guided this study includes meaning and the merits of public participatory process, and the communication dynamics to facilitate public participation process in an endeavour to enhance democracy during COVID-19 pandemic. The study adopted a qualitative study and data were collected from secondary sources including textbooks, articles, public legislative documents, and the Internet. Findings revealed that public participation is a very important tool to enhance democracy as members of the communities are represented in the decision-making process. Due to the collaboration of public office holders and the citizens, conflicts are resolved and best measures to promote development are addressed. The study further revealed that effective communication is very paramount to facilitating the public participation process amidst COVID-19 pandemic. There are several mix of communication

dynamics used to send or receive messages but this study highlighted the adoption of electronic media options such as radio and television programmes, electronic mails, the Internet, Zoom virtual meetings and the social media networks such as Facebook and Whatsapp group chats. It was deduced that the mix of these electronic media options can facilitate effective communication instantly and can gain a very wide coverage, the study concludes that the public office holders should facilitate the public participation process by adopting a mix of communication dynamics as stipulated in this study in an endeavor to enhance democracy.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to the South African provincial legislatures to enhance public participation process:

- A mix of electronic media such as radio and television programmes, electronic mails, the Internet, Zoom virtual meetings and the social media networks such as Facebook and Whatsapp group chats should be adopted to facilitate public participation process during COVID-19 pandemic.
- A stakeholder strategy should be developed by all provincial legislature to disseminate information to all the stakeholders.
- A feedback support strategy should be instituted to ensure that feedback from the citizens are collected to enhance the participatory decision-making process.
- The legislature should collaborate with all the relevant partners during the decision-making phase.
- The legislature should track and review the steps agreed upon as democratic engagement approaches.
- The legislature should improve its investigative capability by partnering with higher-level organizations for successful public participation

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