YOUTH COUNCILLORS' PERCEPTIONS OF PARTICIPATION AT A MUNICIPAL LEVEL: THE CASE OF A LIMPOPO DISTRICT MUNICIPALITY

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ABSTRACT

Over the past three decades youth participation as a theoretical, practical and policy approach has gained popularity globally. In 1996, South Africa established various youth institutions at national, provincial and local level. This has translated into many adult organisations having to make a shift in their thinking and operations. This includes municipalities at local level. In this paper, I focus on one district municipality in the Limpopo province to examine youth participation practices. I use Driskell and Kudva's framework of spaces of participation for adult-run organisations seeking to promote youth participation to examine the appropriateness of a municipality as a space for participation practice. My research shows that adult attitudes towards young people can potentially undermine the creation of other participatory spaces However, bounded operational issues can be countered by the structural opportunities existing there.

Keywords: youth council; participation; South Africa; municipality

INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to examine the appropriateness of the municipality as a space for youth participation practice in South Africa. There is by now a voluminous body of

literature analysing participation as a practice that occurs within particular spaces (see, for example, Cornwall 2004; Gaventa 2004; Driskell and Kudva 2009a). Here I make use of aspects of this literature relating to adult-led organisations seeking to promote youth participation, specifically the work of Driskell and Kudva (2009b). These authors show that organisational practices are central in 'opening up' or 'closing-off' spaces for meaningful youth participation in adult-led organisations. They explain participation in terms of the five key dimensions that intersect within a fluid, changing internal environment, namely *normative*, *structural*, *operational*, *physical* and *attitudinal* dimensions. Understanding organisations as framed by these dimensions enables us to better comprehend participatory spaces. I will outline this framework in detail later.

The rationale for youth participation at a local level is well documented. Advocates of youth participation at municipal level emphasise its accessibility (Checkoway, Allison and Montoya 2005). Timmerman (2009, 572) argues that transferring responsibilities to the local level would make services more efficient and effective, as provision of support will be as 'close to home' as possible. Local government is 'closest to the people', that is, it is situated in close physical proximity to residents (including young people) as compared to other levels of government (Atkinson 2002, 3). In the case of South Africa, this assumption is highly debatable as local government continues to be a place of contestation for delivery of services rather than a conduit for service delivery. Alexander (2010, 37) has called this phenomenon 'a rebellion of the poor'. In most cases, these protests are led by young people at local level.

Proponents of the community youth development approach also argue that service developments in the community should include young people and be based on their needs (Buso, Mogoera and Lenka 2004). This would minimise reliance on external agency. It is assumed that when stakeholders (young people in this case) are involved in the Integrated Development Programme (IDP) process, the municipality is likely to develop policies that are based on their needs.

At the core of the literature on youth participation is the idea that incorporating youth in decision making increases their chance to influence services and policies directed at them (Fitzpatrick, Hastings and Kintrea 2000; Borland, Hill and Laybourn 2001; Sinclair 2004). In a similar vein, Matthew (2003) argues that participation has the potential to reduce domination by service providers at a local level. The Australian Youth Charter, for instance, requires that government departments indicate in their funding applications that they will involve a youth group in their projects (Howard, Newman and Harris 2002), although in some cases this may encourage tokenism. Proponents of the rights-based approach postulate that involving young people in municipal planning upholds their rights as citizens (Landsdown 2001). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN 1989) also urges state governments to demonstrate their commitment to individual rights by engaging the younger generations in decisions that affect their lives from an early age.

Given the lack of research on youth participation practices in South African municipalities, this paper will examine whether the municipality is a suitable space for youth participation practice. It does this by focussing on one district municipality in the Limpopo Province. I will first provide brief background regarding the impetus for youth participation in this context. I will then discuss the methodological approach adopted, and later introduce the analytical framework that was used to examine whether the chosen municipality provides a suitable participatory space for youth and test its applicability. Finally, I wrap up with a few recommendations. For the purposes of this research, I will define youth participation as mechanisms that recognise the interests and potentials of youth by giving them an opportunity to be involved in matters that directly affect them at institutional level.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Since 1996, there has been a concerted effort to promote youth participation in various settings relevant to young people in South Africa. To date, several legislative and policy frameworks were created to promote social, political and economic participation for young people. The impetus for youth participation aligns itself with international instruments. Three are particularly relevant in this case: First, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children that advocates for young people to participate in decisions that directly affect them (UN 1989). Second, priority 10 of the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond which suggests that 'greater involvement *(*of young people*)* in society not only benefit their socioeconomic environment but also builds their own capacity and contributes to their personal growth' (UN 2006, 5) . Lastly, at the regional level, Article 11 of the African Youth Charter (2006) urges African governments to espouse the right for youth to participate in all spheres of society (AU 2006).

In South Africa, a number of pieces of legislation address youth issues directly: the National Youth Commission Act, No. 19 of 1996; and the National Youth Development Agency Act, No. 54 of 2008. The former is no longer in force as it has been repealed by the latter. The latter was enacted to 'intensify youth development, thus ensuring expansion and high impact in service provision' (RSA 2008a). Both laws were promulgated after 1994 and they contribute towards youth development in South Africa. In terms of policies, two documents guided the youth sector: the National Youth Policy (NYP) (2000) which was not adopted by parliament and the National Youth Development Framework (2002–2007) (see RSA 2000, 2002). It took South Africa 13 years to develop a comprehensive youth policy, that is, the National Youth Policy 2009–2014 (RSA 2008b). This policy has since been replaced by the new National Youth Policy (2015–2020). The NYP 2015 – 2020 outlines 'interventions to enable the optimal development of young people, both as individuals and as members of South African society' (RSA 2015, 2). This policy further indicates that

government, civil society and private sectors should provide opportunities, spaces and supports to young people to enable them to thrive. Participation and inclusion have been cited as one of the core principles in the recent youth policy. Basically, youth participation is enshrined in the constitution through the bill of rights and various other legislative and policy frameworks as I have already indicated.

Other strategic documents at government level support the youth development agenda. The National Development Plan 2030 (NPC 2012) identified the need to build capacity among South Africa's active citizenry and this should include young people. The Government Social Cluster Programme of Action (2007–8) also recommended that local youth units or directorates be established in such a manner that directors-general, heads of departments and municipal managers have direct responsibility to youth. The South African department of local government is currently in the process of investigating and fast-tracking youth participation in a more visible and comprehensive manner. As we enter the third decade of formal youth structures' existence in South Africa, recent research points to the problematics of policy evolution in South Africa and concludes that there are a number of constraints that impede government in achieving its socioeconomic inclusion imperative (Gumede 2016). Perhaps it would be worthwhile to examine how this affects the youth sector.

Apart from policies and legislation, institutions were also established. In 2009, the National Youth Development Agency was established out of a merger between the National Youth Commission (1996) and the Umsombovu Youth Fund (2001) for the purpose of facilitating youth's social, political and economic participation. A number of challenges were cited for the merger of these two bodies. However, the new agency is also not without controversy as a number of reasons are cited that point to the problematics of youth institutions such as the high costs of running provincial boards, irregular expenditure, inadequate resources, loan defaults, poor reporting procedures and issues regarding procurement of services (Phaswana and Chereni 2014).

In addition to government youth structures, a civil society youth body known as the South African Youth Council (SAYC) was founded in 1997 to provide a voice for the majority of youth rather than for a few party-based individuals who were already aligned with political parties during the struggle against apartheid. One of the most notable achievements of the SAYC was the coordination of the First Conference on Youth Participation at a Local Government Level held in 2002 at NASREC, Johannesburg. Since then, youth councils and youth units have been set up at some municipalities to take the conference agenda forward. It was emphasised during the conference that the role of municipalities was to institutionalise youth development, and to sensitise stakeholders regarding the needs of young people. This development was significant, as youth development in South Africa had previously been highly 'centralised' and 'institutionalised', failing to attract the majority of young people at grassroots level (Mokwena 2002).

In the South African context, youth participation in local development is being widely debated. Municipalities lag behind other government structures in terms of implementing youth programmes. They also lack budgets and adequate staff to address youth issues (Buso et al. 2004). Webster (2004) contends that power at municipalities is still in the hands of adults who control both structures and processes and thus neglecting youth. Several municipalities have not yet developed frameworks or structures for youth participation at a local level. Within this context, principles of youth participation clash with traditional notions of being young in which young people are expected to demonstrate respect for elders, as speaking against elders is conceived as a lack of respect for seniority (Phaswana 2008).

It is alleged that SAYC, as the umbrella organisation for youth councils all over the country, experiences ineffective leadership at national and provincial level, and lacks organisational capacity and strategy to acquire resources from government (ANCYL 2004). There are also allegations of strong hierarchies within communities that make it hard for young people to participate locally (Action Survey Report 2000 cited in Webster 2004). Iheduru (2004) further alleges that youth participation in South Africa is highly politicised, benefitting those young people who have ties with the ruling party.

Everatt (2000) was the first to question the clustering of youth with other vulnerable groups – children, elderly, women, and disabled – arguing that it is an indication of the insignificance of youth development in government programmes. Upon taking office in 2009, President Zuma announced a new ministry for children, women and youth. Many who believed in the idea of a Ministry of Youth, particularly those in the opposition such as the Inkatha Youth Brigade, hoped youth development would receive attention. However, soon afterwards, the youth sector pulled out of this new ministry, preferring to remain in the office of the presidency. At the time, the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) under Julius Malema was a formidable force that ensured the president's accedence to the Union Buildings and made sure that its wishes were met. So far, participation has been restricted to consultation rather than involving youth in decision making.

Nonetheless, a number of young people currently participate at municipal level. The next section outlines the research context and methodology adopted for this research.

CASE STUDY

Evergreen is a district municipality in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. It was founded in 2000 in terms of the Municipal Structures Act (no.117 of 1998). The district is divided into five local municipalities, and it is a mix of rural and town settlements. The district municipality council consists of the political and administrative

component and is the final decision-making structure in the municipality. Data from the 2011 Census and the 2015/6 IDP were extracted to provide the situation at Evergreen. Currently, there are about 1.2 million people living in Evergreen. As in other regions of South Africa, most young people in Evergreen are affected by high levels of unemployment (54,4%). This is associated with a lack of appropriate health care centres, the marginalisation of women, poverty and malnutrition, the abuse of alcohol and drugs, and a lack of community centres. Due to a lack of employment opportunities, a large number of young people in rural Evergreen migrate to big cities such as Johannesburg and Pretoria in search of jobs. It is acknowledged in the IDP document that the so-called priority groups (women, children and youth, disabled, elderly) have not been adequately catered for in the district. Evergreen was purposively selected because it was one of the first municipalities in Limpopo to heed the national call to establish youth councils in 2002.

METHODOLOGY

This paper draws from a literature review, municipal documents, and observations of and interviews with key informants at Evergreen. A qualitative interpretive approach was considered appropriate to privilege participants' accounts of meaning, experiences and perceptions (De Vos 2005). This resonates with Denzin's (1970a) notion that respondents have their own, unique way of defining their world. During data collection, I predominantly opted for methods that would allow participants to express themselves and also privilege their perceptions (Barber and Naulty 2005). In doing so, participants were given an opportunity to talk about their experience of being in the youth council. This took the form of face-to-face individual interviews (8) and focus group discussions (2 with 6 participants each) with members of the various youth councils (herein referred to as youth councillors). It should be noted that the study focussed on seeking the perspectives of youth councillors with regard to their participation at the municipal level as they were considered key informants in this study. An interview schedule was prepared and piloted prior to the fieldwork. Each interview took between one and two hours. Individual interviews were conducted in a small office allocated to youth councillors while focus groups took place in a larger municipal boardroom. These venues were considered accessible to all youth councillors, as they were familiar places where the district youth council held their meetings on a regular basis. Prior to the interviews, I would request that participants to choose the language they would prefer during the interviews. This was not a challenge for me as an interviewer, as I speak most of the local languages in the area. However, all participants opted for English. These interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and the quotes are presented here unedited.

Two measures of trustworthiness were employed to ensure rigour in this study. The first method is called within-method triangulation. This involves taking one method

and employing multiple strategies within that method to examine the data (Denzin 1970b). In-depth interviews and focus groups were used to explore experiences of participation at the individual and collective level. People's perceptions tend to differ at individual and group level, and this could be due to listening to others' perspectives during group discussion. The second method used to ensure rigour here was what scholars refer to as reflexivity. Sharing cultural background with participants enabled me to understand participants' use of the English language and the subtexts they used – an outsider would have struggled to make sense of some of the conversations. Assumptions about shared experiences also counted. Participants often assumed that the researcher understood what they were going through. However, at times this was problematic during discussions, because they often tried to hold back some information assuming that the researcher would draw on her own knowledge and interpretation of the situation. During the interviews, political debates around youth issues often emerged. The youth councillors complained about poor delivery of service and lack of employment opportunities. There were opportunities for respondents to divulge names and certain information about their own concerns with regard to the challenges they meet in their institutions.

For reasons of confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used throughout the research process as agreed with the council during the time of negotiating access. Informed consent forms were signed by all participants and gatekeepers at the municipality.

Participants were chosen because they exhibited a particular feature of interest (Ritchie, Lewis and Elam 2003), that is, being elected to serve in the youth council within the jurisdiction of Evergreen. I set out to balance demographic variables such as sex, race and age: however, this was thwarted by the fact that I dealt with pre-elected groups which were not as diverse in composition as expected. The final sample (18) consisted of young people in the age category 22–33 years, which reflects the broader definition of youth in South Africa (14–35 years). This definition is considered broad in comparison to the UN youth definition of 15–24 years (UN 2004). There were more males (n=13) elected to the youth councils than females (n=5), which points to the gendered nature of participation in the South African context (Moses 2008). Interestingly, this mirrored the composition of adult councillors, who were predominantly male. This is despite the fact that 54.4% of the district's population are female as published in Evergreen's latest IDP document. While qualitative studies which use small samples are often criticised for their lack of generalisability, I would argue that they can be 'useful in highlighting the existence of certain phenomena' (Van Maanen 1998 in Kelliher 2005, 123). Furthermore, there was a staggering absence of youth from ethnic minorities in the youth councils. Whites, Coloureds and Indians account for 2.8%, 0.5% and 0.4% of the population respectively. Below I present a model of youth participation suitable for adult-run contexts.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 below illustrates Driskell and Kudva's (2009a) framework which is useful in terms of analysing youth participation practices in this context. These authors propose five factors, each structured relative to the other, that support or limit meaningful youth participation: *normative*, *structural*, *operational*, *physical* and *attitudinal*. The first dimension is the *normative space* which is explained in terms of articulation of values regarding young people's participation. Without public declarations that prioritise youth participations, efforts are wasted. The second dimension is *structural* and is rooted in normative space and here the authors argue that, in the absence of structure, declarations become idealistic. Examples include dedicated staff for youth participation, assigned programmes and annual budgets allocated to this purpose. The *operational* dimension involves the everyday practices of organisation, that is, the mechanism which gives young people a voice in decision making and management. This, the authors note, is embedded within the structural space. It is concerned with the actual practice of decision making as opposed to creating a structural space for youth input. It involves how effectively the structural space is used, that is, how much weight is given to youth inputs by adult leaders. The *physical* dimension is the most tangible space and refers to the actual space/facilities that young people claim as their own. The authors assert that when young people are fully integrated, the physical space becomes unbound as young people can access other facilities in the organisation. Finally, the *attitudinal* dimension is deeply embedded in interpersonal relations and is also shaped by the identities of persons in the organisation. This is the trickiest dimension as it has the potential to undermine all of the others. It is manifested in adults' culture of acceptance, support and understanding, and also in young people's ability to claim the right to participate. Driskell and Kudva (2009b) conclude that the five dimensions are mutually constitutive and interactive. A combination of all these dimensions creates an environment conducive to meaningful youth participation. However, the non-existence of one dimension does not necessarily mean participation cannot occur.

In addition to this framework, Gaventa's (2004) analogy of space is also useful to consider here. Quoting Cornwall (2004), Gaventa identifies participatory spaces as '*closed*', '*invited*', and '*claimed*'. *Closed spaces* are those that open up possibilities for participation whereas *invited spaces* widen participation by inviting people in. *Claimed spaces* are described as those spaces created by the non-powerful, usually around a common purpose or through mobilisation. Gaventa (2004, 34) further acknowledges that participation is shaped by power relations:

> Power relations help to shape the boundaries of spaces, what is possible within them, and who may enter, with which identities, discourses and interests.

These analytic frameworks were useful in terms of analysing participation in this context, as the next section will show.

Table 1:   A summary of the five spaces of participation (for adult-run
               organizations seeking to promote youth participation)

	Type of space	Description	Manifestation
Normative space	Conceptual	Expression of values regarding young people's participation	Organizational mission and goals, statements from the ED (Executive Director) etc.
Structural space	Tangible (bounded by normative)	Gives form to normative space through organizational structure, programming, staffing and budget priorities	Dedicated staff position for youth outreach, budget for youth-led programmes etc.
Operational space	Tangible + conceptual (bounded by normative and structural)	Everyday processes/ mechanisms by which young people participate in decision making and management	Youth selection of representatives, youth facilitation of meetings; real weight given to input or (youth making decision on their own)
Physical space	Tangible (bounded by all of the above)	An actual space that young people can claim as their own	A youth meeting room, youth-run centre, dedicated (formally or informally) hang-out area
Attitudinal space	Conceptual - unbound but though shaped in part by all the above, and vice versa	Individual and group interactions between adult and youth; and between young people	A general culture of acceptance and support towards young people; and between young people; youth expectations regarding their participation

Source: Driskell and Kudva (2009a, 81)

FINDINGS

Young people within the jurisdiction of Evergreen *claimed* the space for participation. As early as 2002, several youth formations, political and apolitical, came together to form the district youth council and subsequently local youth councils were organised at local level. This move was steered by formal youth structures at the provincial level, including the youth wings of major political parties in the province. The district youth council was formed by co-opted members from local youth councils. Cornwall (2004) views this as a claimed/organic space of participation where the non-powerful create possibilities for participation through mobilisation. This is not to suggest that

there was no resistance from adults within this municipality. However, through persistence and determination, provision was made for young people to elect their own representatives. In this case, the claimed space was instrumental in facilitating all other spaces.

Examining participation at Evergreen using Driskell and Kudva's framework reveals some positive aspects in relation to participatory spaces created. First, in terms of the *normative space*, there is no indication either from the vision or mission statement of the municipality that youth participation was espoused at Evergreen. Youth participation is something that they do simply because young people have claimed the space for participation. Also, both the mayor and the municipal manager have an interest in involving youth in their planning and have ensured that young people are provided with an office. This office is used exclusively by the youth council and is equipped with a computer and telephone. The secretary of the youth council, an unemployed youth, is always available as a point of contact for young people visiting the municipal offices. For the duration of my research, I also spent time in this space. This provision of office space has clearly secured a tangible *physical space* for youth participation despite the fact that there is no clear official statement that acknowledges the normative space.

With regard to the *structural* dimension, there is a nominated adult councillor and a senior staff member (community services manager) who oversees implementation of youth development policies and negotiates their budget at council. According to participants, this councillor is accountable to youth in cases where their inputs are not considered or being acted upon by the council. A portfolio committee for youth was formed to act as interface between the municipal council and youth, giving political direction to the administrative component of the municipality. There is also a budget allocated for youth as long as youth councillors produce their proposals for programmes and are accountable to the municipal council on how the allocated money is spent. However, there were complaints that this budget is never sufficient to run all of their programmes.

In the South African context, as indicated earlier, the youth council is an independent structure, yet it relies on the municipality for resources. Allocation of resources rests with the most powerful entity, in this case, the council. Arguably, municipalities have no legal obligation to provide for youth. According to participants, financial relationships always impacted on their autonomy. For instance, Evergreen has a large backlog in infrastructure development projects and basic service provision work. Participants reported that officials have a tendency to withhold resources citing this backlog as their reasons for not providing for youth. This constraint, as reflected by participants, affected the advancement of youth programmes. Interestingly, youth councillors interviewed described this as a deliberate attempt to undermine their efforts:

> They (officials) can keep the information directed at youth, and then give you at the last minute so there's nothing you can do. You will be seen as a failure (by fellow youth).
> **[Interview with Ndou, male youth councillor]**

Examining the *operational* dimension at Evergreen highlighted some inconsistencies. Mechanisms for participation in decision making are mediated through the office of the community service manager and the nominated councillor, as young people cannot directly participate in council meetings. At times, this created frustration for them, particularly if the two adults were not supportive of their programmes. In some cases, the youth reported that they feel outraged if their inputs are not acted upon, particularly as they are not allowed to be in those meetings. However, the majority of participants expressed their satisfaction with their current manager, who has been supportive and receptive to youth matters. The youth council is in charge of designing and implementing its programmes without interference from adults.

The *attitudinal* space is rooted in interpersonal relations, interactions between adults and youth and between young people themselves (Driskell and Kudva 2009b). The interviews with youth councillors show that this dimension is in fact capable of undermining all other dimensions of participatory spaces. First, there were concerns that the politics within the municipal sector permeate the youth council as a structure. The majority of participants expressed concerns regarding their interactions with certain officials. Apparently, the authority of other youth formations, other than those affiliated to the ruling party, was often challenged. The following comment highlights this:

> They [officials] were not necessarily recognising us in fact I can say they were undermining us. The reason why I'm saying this is because they were saying: 'What is it that you can do for young people because you are also young?' You see, those were some of the questions we were facing, 'Where are you from? Which political organisation are you coming from?'
> **[Interview with Phuti, male youth councillor]**

Second, the prevailing political climate in the country has a tendency to influence the functioning of the youth council, as the focus group discussion below demonstrates:

> **Jomo**: The youth council is influenced by political movements. You might see that when political dynamics of the country changes, it also affect the youth council and you will have to adjust to that, because as we approach local government elections…as we are doing now. We have contestation of powers by political parties with their own youth formations this simply means they might want to turn the youth council in their own directions.

This comment sparked a lively discussion. It was apparent that these political dynamics also thwarted adults' efforts to change their own attitudes towards youth. The youth councillors were convinced that the change in attitude was for electioneering purposes rather than to accommodate youth matters. According to participants, politicians become more receptive in the period towards elections for

fear of losing the 'youth vote' – a necessity in a country where youth are considerable sector of voters.

> **Jozi:** for now, you might think young people are taken seriously because we are approaching local government elections…Now they (politicians) need us to cast votes and all that.

> **Mothwa:** You ask yourself - you ask yourself a question - why all this attention now? ... Were they (politicians) thinking that young people don't exist or what? Young people have been in existence even before 1994 [the year of independence in South Africa] and I don't know what their problem was.

The youth council was a highly politicised environment. Among the youth councillors themselves, there were elements of prejudice towards youth formations from opposition parties and those that were non-partisan. It should be noted that the youth council is formed by a variety of youth from civil society organisations and political parties, which makes it very diverse in nature. At Evergreen, the majority of youth councillors were affiliated to the ruling party in the district. This diversity, despite the fact that it strengthens the legitimacy of the youth council, was not appreciated within this context. A lack of respect for divergent perspectives was also problematic, as evident in the following comment:

> We don't respect each other, and sometimes these Christian groups don't understand how the youth council work. **(Interview with Tshidi, female youth councillor)**

Within this district, the government remain the primary employer due to lack of employment opportunities. The municipality as a local sphere of government remains an attractive avenue for career advancement. Seemingly, a number of youth councillors elected assumed that by virtue of having access to the leadership of the municipality their chances of being employed within the municipality were high. Lucky indicated this in one of the focus groups held:

> **Lucky**: I think one of the things which might be personal is that...uhm. Some of us are educated and unemployed... and being in the youth council gives us an advantage...we are closer to municipal officials...By interacting with them and also being advantaged to speak to those who have the powers to employ, you will be able to access job easily, because you will be the first person to know if there is a position.

This finding could suggest that young people's involvement in the youth council is motivated by their need for jobs and is consistent with the UN youth report (2005: 72), which states that 'membership [in youth councils] is increasingly perceived as a way to enhance a young person's career or other prospects rather than an opportunity to advance youth-driven ideas and policies'. Lucky's honest assertion in this case triggered some underlying frustrations among the youth councillors and steered a debate. First, there was a faction that disputed his view. Their argument was that officials are unlikely to employ youth councillors who were vociferous and confrontational regarding youth matters:

Mary: I just want to differ with him (Lucky) because, if you are in the youth council and you are also working hard for young people, lobbying for their issues, you become the number one enemy in the municipality.

Me: Why is that?

Tebogo: Yes...you may be one of the first persons to know about the vacancies and everything…the post will be advertised and you will see it but if you are working hard, lobbying around resources for youth, you are going to be the number one enemy and you will never work in the municipality

Other focus group members felt that the municipality consider the youth council as a reservoir of cheap labour. The following conversation highlights this*:*

Jan: There are challenges off course the youth council is even benefiting local government as an institution

Me: In what ways?

Henry: You see how the municipality operates, they notify you they want to meet young people at IDP (Integrated Development Planning), they will take the documents and give them to X, and X is not paid for that role of doing the task of a community liaison officer… unconsciously so X does the job. Basically you realise that youth council as an organisation, by closing the gap between municipality and community, we are playing an important role when we mobilise young people. Sometimes we don't even realise that the municipality should be appointing a community liaison officer because these youth councils fulfil this role.

To emphasise this, one participant used his municipality as an example. Apparently, a position was not filled for some time as the youth council performed those duties. It appeared that the youth council was somehow misused at the municipality as there were no clear definitions of the roles members should play. This debate ensued in other group discussions and most young people felt this was because of their vulnerability as they are not in education, employment and training (NEET). There were tendencies to assume that they are available to run errands for the municipal officers. What was disturbing was that participants mentioned that, in most cases, they acquiesce for fear of victimisation or falling out of favour with officials.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the municipality as an area for youth participation and found that, despite the fact that it is still fraught with some practical difficulties, the municipality does promise to be a suitable space. While it is acknowledged that this research is limited to a single case study, the findings are useful in highlighting the progress and challenges encountered in adult-youth relationships in municipalities, as well as among young people themselves. Overall, the role of the municipality as a

meaningful space for the practice of youth participation is still limited; it could still do more to provide an enabling and empowering environment for youth.

As witnessed in this study, attitudinal issues constrained practice, undermining structural components of the participatory interactions. For instance, provision of the physical space does not necessarily translate into actions which are relevant to and informed by youth. For instance, despite a special office and dedicated budget allocated to youth at Evergreen, officials continued to withhold resources from them, preventing advancement of youth programmes. Yet the youth council had a supportive community manager who created opportunities for their participation, and this enabled youth's voice to be heard at council meetings. As a result the structural space created attempted to enable the constraining operational dimension. Overall, the attitudinal space undermined all other aspects of the participatory space. It is recommended that adults working with youth should invest more time in learning how to include young people in participatory structures.

The challenges facing youth participation at a local level need to be contextualised in the country's youth development drive. The need to promote an integrated and comprehensive approach to youth development as stipulated in the national youth policy appears to be contradictory. From the research, it was apparent that South Africa is far from achieving integrated and comprehensive youth development Gumede (2016) attribute this to inappropriate policies that fail to take context into account. The absence of youth from ethnic minorities, minimal participation of women and overrepresentation of older age groups within the youth council raise important questions regarding the implementation of youth participation in this context. Are these councils designed for a specific group of young people or are they for all youth? One major concern is whether these practices might carry with them the threat of further fragmentation and marginalisation of certain groups of young people. Previous analyses of youth participation elsewhere have shown that minority youth are often left out in participatory projects (see Thomas 2007). However, this applied to countries where ethnic minorities were more disadvantaged. In this case, ethnic minority youth are relatively well-off in comparison to youth belonging to the majority group. Regardless, the NYP 2015-2020 emphasises social cohesion as one of its strategic pillars (RSA 2008b). This is understandable considering South Africa's long history of racial division which continues to be recycled in public by social media platforms. Will social cohesion ever be achieved in a country where people still group themselves according to race? The limitation of this small scale study was that it did not seek perspectives from youth from minority groups; however, the interviews with youth councillors highlighted that these groups of youth never attend government programmes. What needs to be understood are the reasons why these groups of youth do not respond to municipal programmes. It is recommended that further research seek the perspectives of these groups of young people. This will enable us to understand diverse perspectives.

The youth councillors interviewed in this research demonstrated a great deal of resilience and optimism, typical of youth activism in South Africa. Their capacity to uphold their standpoints and criticise authorities, as observed in the interviews, demonstrates a continuation of this tradition of youth activism. What was remarkable about these youth councillors throughout the research process was the unwavering optimism they showed. They understood fully their roles within the youth council and were prepared to challenge structures that made it difficult for them to participate. It is therefore recommended that policy makers in South Africa invest in youth research to better understand how to develop evidence-based, youth-informed policies.

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