RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rebuilding active public participation after the COVID-19 era: The South African case

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The consequences of COVID-19 have impacted the poor and vulnerable populations of the world significantly, particularly in countries like South Africa. State institutions have been prioritising mitigating the impacts of the pandemic. And in the academy, there has been an influx of recent scholarship contending with the psychological and physical repercussions of the pandemic. This article focuses on South Africa’s rebuilding of public participation in governance in the country post-pandemic. The article is based on a qualitatively rooted methodology consisting of a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including official state documents, academic books and articles, and reports from non-governmental organisations and think tanks. The article further draws on the findings of global and continental research and proposes steps for rebuilding public participation in South Africa in a manner that ensures accessible governance for all, especially the poor and vulnerable populations. An exposition of the legislative measures enhancing public participation in South Africa is accompanied by a brief social and economic picture before and during COVID-19, and a comparative synopsis of old and new direction of the processes and realities of the phenomenon in society. The research-based key steps leading to successfully rebuilding political and social engagement after COVID-19 were identified as being founded on a number of steps. The first related to the process of moving from community diversity to communal unity through the continuous development of trust between community and leadership, the processes of community developmental empowerment, the active participation of women in political leadership and the active role of the ward committees in community governance.

KEYWORDS
active public participation, COVID-19, rebuilding, South Africa

1 | INTRODUCTION

Bearing in mind the fact that the pandemic poses a threat to the country’s economy, governance, and policy, both in the long and short term, it is imperative to prepare for what the world will look like post-pandemic.

The functions of the state have a direct impact on shaping the future. It is for this reason that public participation in policy priorities, which are the foundation of democracy, community empowerment, social and economic transformation, has been chosen as the subject of this paper. These realities need to be dissected in relation to the existing era of power relations with the governing party prior to the Covid-19 period and their serious impact on the state’s response to citizens’ demands and engagement. Inevitably the effects of the pandemic in the post Covid-19 period will be affected by the government’s attitudes and positioning. This is because active citizen engagement and public participation that can make and effect positive change through dedication and effectiveness depends on an effective...
analyses of power relations. Such an analysis and dissection need a thorough understanding of the state’s level of inclusivity with the public in the realm of political decision-making (Creighton, 2005).

2 | DESIGN AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilises a qualitative, case study based approach. The approach is supported by analysis of primary and secondary documents consisting of state-provided policy papers that have been specifically designed to play a key role in communities’ approaches and behaviour during the pandemic, academic research articles and newspaper articles from a range of different sources. This study seeks to produce a wide-ranging report of COVID-19’s effects on diverse population groups within South Africa and to comparatively project the future of public participation post-pandemic in South Africa, especially in the revitalisation and rejuvenation of the existing policy and legislative guidelines. The epistemological grounding of the project is rooted in the interpretative methodology as exemplified by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007, pp. 103–104).

3 | SOUTH AFRICA: A BRIEF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PICTURE BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19

A large majority of South Africa’s population of 59 million people has been negatively affected by the Covid-19 virus. Already, prior to the onset of the COVID-19 virus, according to the Gini coefficient, a measure of societal inequality, South Africa was regarded as the most unequal society in the world with a Gini coefficient score of 0.63. Over 14% of the country’s population live in informal settlements without proper houses and sanitation (World Bank, 2020), while Department of Stats South Africa (2020) has reported a 30% unemployment rate among its citizens. Ironically, it is exactly these already disenfranchised, marginalised categories of people, which have been hardest hit by the virus and its ensuing economic impact.

Most of the citizens who live in the country’s informal settlements have been victims of Covid-19 transmissions due to the high levels of population density and lack of access to necessities, such as water and sanitation. The poor condition of existing infrastructure makes it nearly impossible to adhere to state rules, such as ‘social distancing’ and the serious problems facing them in terms of access to social grants, food, transport, crowded circumstances and long travels to destinations where service deliveries take place (Wamsler, 2017, pp. 149–150; Williams et al., 2018, p. 871; Wilkinson, 2020; Van Belle et al., 2020).

Good health care for a country is a key ingredient for a decent quality of life and is instrumental in the maintenance of sustainable economic growth in South Africa. A healthy population is the foundation of a country’s economy and the state effort to fight against poverty and build a healthy population is a national and continental necessity. These realities have been analysed empirically by Alhassan et al. (2020) who have shown in their work the significance of the death rate, life expectancy and public health expenditure in relation to economic growth sustainability under COVID-19 in Nigeria. In the analysis, the researchers pinpoint the foundations of a stable economy. The key ingredient includes the acceptance and efforts to plan and implement the “17 SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals).”

This reality is rooted, first and foremost, on effective and efficient healthcare services, which reduce mortality, and is instrumental in engendering sustainability at the rates of economic growth. In such a situation the processes and outcomes of social sustainability, education, economic growth and economic partnership to achieve the goal become a concrete reality. Such changes to peoples’ lives point to the idea that a healthy population is a fundamental prerequisite for a country’s economic growth. Alhassan et al. (2020) have shown that a number of studies have provided the argument that the building of a healthy population is the foundation of a strong economy based on a process of continuous developmental paths.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a serious, and in some cases, devastating impact on countries’ economies. Despite the burgeoning vaccine distribution process in many parts of the world, the vaccine distribution measures took a long time to materialise for all sectors of society. The impact of the pandemic on the economy and society has been devastating. Corruption in the South African public service including funds associated with the Temporary Employer/Employee Relief Scheme were the tip of the iceberg as such funds were perpetually looted by private companies. The civil society organisation Corruption Watch (CW) recorded over 100 corruption cases associated to the fund (Corruption Watch, 2020).

Inevitably, corruption, mismanagement and the inevitable financial fall-out of South Africa’s pandemic management has led to a financial crisis. The shutdown of all productive sectors during the first lockdown led to unemployment that reached 30%, economic growth has stagnated as a result of lock down measures and the national debt as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) has reached the 64% mark. This debt is expected to increase to up to 82% in 2020/21 as a product of a R300 billion revenue shortfall, and is projected to build continually unless there is a significant GDP growth (Arndt et al., 2020; Dludla, 2020).

These outcomes are a direct result of the lockdown. The second quarter lockdown led to a drop in output of the most economically productive sectors except for the agricultural sector. An increase in maize exports coupled with a rising international demand for pecans and citrus led to a 15.1% rise in the agricultural sector.

Insurance, banking, business, and real estate services fell by 28.9%. Personal grooming services and sporting events were all halted by the rules and regulations stipulated by lockdowns. Hospitals faced a decline of 32% as a product of pausing elective operations as an additional safety measure (Mathe, 2020). According to official calculations the demand side of the economy faced a 52% slump due to a serious decline in household spending and lowered exports. The economic activity in the communications and transportation sectors fell by 67.9% due to the halt in air travel, while the closure of hotels, other
accommodation, and the ban on alcohol and tobacco sales resulted in a 67.6% decline. The highest decline in output—76.6%—was in the construction sector, followed by the 74.9% fall in the manufacturing sector. The mining sector declined by 73% (Department of Stats South Africa, 2020).

4 | PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN LEGISLATION

The wide literature on public participation in South Africa has recognised its role as a fundamental tenet of the country's participatory democracy, as well as the roles of existing institutions within government, which support it. It is legally founded on Section 152(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 1996, especially Section 152 (1) (a) g), which dictates policy in accordance with the principles of accountable and participatory governance, accountability, transparency, and collective action. These are supplemented by local government laws such as the Municipal Structures Act (No. 117 of 1998), especially Section 44 (3) (g) which paves the way for direct contact between municipalities and communities (RSA, 1998).

The vital links between municipalities and communities are the ward committees whose functions have been described in considerable detail in the Municipal Structures Act (Chapter 4, Part 4), supplemented by the Municipal Systems Act No. 32 of 2000, (Chapter 4) (RSA, 2000). The latter obliges the local leadership to engage with the citizens directly through continuous public participation that is instrumental in citizens’ rights to contribute to the decision-making process of the municipality. This legislation is founded on the Batho Pele (People First) statement of 1997, which declares the needs of the public as the priority through access to consultation, openness, information, and transparency—the fundamentals of public participation (RSA Department of public service and administration, 1997).

5 | PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: OLD AND NEW DIRECTIONS

Public participation by citizens in state policy processes lacks a solid definition in international literature; however, it is widely accepted that at its foundation it is a social process that comes in a wide variety of forms. Bearing in mind the responsibility of the state to engage with its citizens in terms of shaping policy directions, priorities and options public participation is a social process that comes in a wide variety of forms. Most immediately, public participation consists of the open exchange of information, a free and open debate, consultations and planned agreements.

Public participation is often linked to related concepts such as “public engagement” or citizen engagement” (Lane, 2005, p. 284; Rowe & Frewer, 2005, pp. 252–253). Public participation must be contextualised to produce a holistic understanding of what it entails (Woodruff & Stults, 2016, pp. 798–799; Woodruff & Regan, 2019, pp. 54–55).

Research conducted on public participation in developed countries has found that the relationships between social and economic marginalisation and equality and the potential for public participation contributes to the production of “democratic illusion” a strong belief among citizens that democracy is in a state of malaise, signified by the dissatisfaction with democratic politics among citizens as exemplified by Young (2011), Mees et al. (2018), Kammerbauer and Wamsler (2017). This includes interactions with citizens not only at the local level, but also on a larger scale between the institutions of the state, the private sector, and civil society broadly (Kammerbauer & Wamsler, 2017). The uneven power balance between the state and the people has been thrown askew and intensified because of Covid-19 (Mees et al., 2018; Young, 2011).

It is felt strongly from all sides that the challenge of community engagement and participation in an unequal society has reached a point where citizens have recognised the conditions and repercussions of inequality and demand change. International literature has shown that open and honest exchange of information and direct and continuous participation in the political process results in robust and defensible policy decisions. The fundamental issues of public governance—service, delivery, and fiscal transparency—which promote an effective public sector; are driven by the principles of transparency, accountability, and honesty. Thoughtful debate and a direct line to the public are essential in promoting these three principles (Davies, 2001, pp. 78–79; Davies, 2002, pp. 193–194; Davies et al., 2014). The scholarly focus on public participation emanates from the commonly shared belief that a healthy democracy is characterised by consistent dialogue between a country and its citizens (Creighton, 2005, p. 7).

Political engagement cannot be generalised, as it heavily depends on the character of the ruling regime. The pandemic has brought the importance of social and political engagement to the forefront, because the pandemic has negatively impacted on engagement, transparency, and access to information. Political engagement is of the utmost importance in order to deal decisively with problems; and establish and maintain honest communication, as well as trust between society and the state (Zakhour & Metzger, 2018, p. 346).

Political engagement also relies on a complete understanding of the ways in which government functions at all levels of society for citizens to contribute to a realistic vision of the future. When political engagement is commonly recognised as a responsibility of belonging to a society, the public should begin to reconceptualise their own self-interest as belonging to the common good. This must begin with peace and unity among ideologically, politically, and socially diverse local populations. In addition, for mass political participation to become a reality, government transparency becomes vitally important. People can only actively participate when they are fully informed of the functions, priorities, and challenges facing public institutions (Tahvilzadeh, 2015, pp. 239–240).
Since 1994 South Africa has legislated a system of community-based political processes. The proposed steps to increase political engagement revolve around the systems of local government, with the potential to expand outwardly to provincial and national levels. Public political participation, in this sense, is the process of direct engagement between communities and state institutions, which aims at agreements that impact decision-making in the political sphere (Walker et al., 2015, pp. 4–5).

Community participation in decision-making processes is a collective agreement based on social transformation, which benefits everyone. Political engagement then, must be an honest and transparent relationship devoid of co-option. This means that public participation and engagement is formulated as an honest, transparent, and accountable alliance and working relationship devoid of co-option (Hisschemöller & Cuppen, 2015, pp. 34–35; Landemore, 2015, pp. 167–168).

The pandemic will inevitably come to an end, leaving the country to wrestle with its long-term ramifications. When the time comes South Africa will need to be ready to find the best way forward. For this to happen, the alliances, unity and common purpose of all societal sections are of fundamental importance as is the alliance, cooperation and synergy of the research and scientific sector. Above all there is the necessity of the unity and co-operation of the state and its citizen at all societal levels.

However, to do so, both parties must become acquainted with several fundamental truths. Firstly, there needs to be a realisation that the possibility of post-Covid GDP growth can only become a tangible reality through investment in both the public and private sectors. In addition, infrastructure development throughout the country is a serious necessity that needs immediate consideration and action. There is potential for investment in infrastructure through Public–Private Partnerships (PPPs) which would result in possible wage cuts in the public sector despite likely objections from trade unions. Investment is more likely to originate from PPPs rather than the private sector alone because of the crisis-ridden situation facing it due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, there is a general lack of trust towards the private sector due to a history of mismanagement of public money, failure to provide services and corruption.

On the other hand, even though the rand remains relatively vulnerable to further weakening, history has shown that it has the potential of improving at least to a certain extent. In March 2020, it managed to recover from 19.1 to 16.8 (Invest Online, 2020). One of the key factors that can play an important role towards post-Covid-19 South Africa’s economic future is the government’s attitude and actions towards the people, especially the majority, because it will be difficult to plan a way forward without revitalising an integration process between public participation and decision-making processes. In the adjusted budget documents, the South African cabinet is in support of a growth policy, which aspires to begin a serious reduction of the debt to GDP ratio in the 2023/24 financial year (Mboweni, 2020; RSA Department of National Treasury, 2020). However, such an achievement can only be built on collaboration, cooperation, and collective effort. Given the existing circumstances in 2021 and the presence of Covid-19 this will undoubtedly be a difficult task. The potential of the debt to GDP ratio reaching or even exceeding 100% by 2023 cannot be dismissed. In that circumstance, there is a likelihood of the state borrowing from several foreign sources, such as the BRICS Development Bank or the International Monetary Fund. The consequences of this outcome could result in a very serious strain on state finances and a significant decline in value of the rand.

Covid-19 has impacted on power relationships and dynamics and these realities have important repercussions for the future of the country, its people and public participation. These are directly related to the existing social and economic conditions of the country, an unequal society—very badly in need of a responsive state and a rejuvenated and decisive process, and planning for public participation at all levels.

With this context in mind, this paper proposes several steps, which utilise public participation as a foundational step in restructuring South Africa’s economy and society.

### 6.1 Step 1: from community diversity to unity

In South Africa, freedom and social and community diversity are of key importance for the country’s democratic project for the future. Maton argues that despite the importance of freedom and diversity, it is necessary for people to recognise that they belong to a larger South African community (Maton, 2008, pp. 5–6).

Leaders are fundamental to uniting communities through their efforts to make individuals and groups aware of the true realities and challenges of their communal environment (Collins et al., 2014, pp. 329–330). Accountability and transparency of the community and political leaders create a community united in purpose, common trust and authentic communication (Raelin, 2016, pp. 125–126).

In addition, good and honest leadership is often capable of shaping community behaviours thus building deeply rooted community solidarity (Adler & Goggin, 2005, pp. 240–241). Community solidarity is not the process of sharing beliefs but a shared sense of purpose (Galston, 2007; Apaliyah et al., 2012, pp. 34–35).

### 6.2 Step 2: trust between community and leadership

It is the duty and responsibility of politicians and community leaders to create a united citizen environment founded on the fundamental principles of honesty, accountability and common trust, the foundations of sustainable and efficient leadership in a community (Raelin, 2016, pp. 125–126).
This type of leadership motivates and inspires self-efficacy in the community in order to meet challenges at various levels (Wituk et al., 2005, pp. 90–91; Porr, 2011, p. 98).

6.3  Step 3: community empowerment

Legitimacy, empowerment, and learning are the core tenets of successful community political engagement. This is because effective public participation empowers people to deal directly and collectively with national, provincial, and local issues. Input is needed from all stakeholders and role players. This means that the citizens’ knowledge of complex problems is of key importance (Hisschemöller & Cuppen, 2015). Community empowerment is one of the responsibilities of the state and communities themselves. South African history post-1994, however, has demonstrated that community empowerment initiatives could be made more successful through alliances between the state and civil society. This is because policies need to be structured in such a way that the path ahead needs to be rubber-stamped as “legitimate” principally by the representatives of the majority. Such a legitimacy has created a healthy debate and agreements that have been shielded in parts of Southern Europe (Font et al., 2014, p. 38) and have been labelled the “professionalization of public administration” (Bherer et al., 2017).

6.4  Step 4: Women in political leadership

As previously detailed, South Africa’s social and economic challenges have led to a dramatic increase in wealth inequality. This phenomenon has particularly affected poor women. Positioned on the margins of society, such women are dispositioned to experience deprivation and gender-based violence (Cheteni et al., 2019; Segalo, 2015; Tibeisigwa & Visser, 2016).

This issue, however, is not unique to South Africa. Research suggests that, globally, women’s ability to participate in political, economic, and social processes is stifled by such systems that perpetuate gender inequality (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018). According to Kumar’s research, these obstacles to political participation are likely to persist (Kumar, 2018). These realities are a far cry from the aspirations of the Sustainable Development Goals established over 20 years ago.

The goal of empowering women through increased engagement in the political process has yet to be realised (United Nations, 2019).

It is essential that women engage in public decision-making processes. Female participation in public life ensures that their ideas and experiences are part of the political discourse, leading to policy that more completely addresses the needs of the population. But despite the fact that more than half of the global population is female, women occupy only 23% of parliamentary seats internationally. Transnational organisations have attempted to remedy this through formal agreements, protocols, and conventions advocating gender parity in politics (Radu, 2018).

However, these official decisions have done little to affect the root causes of female political marginalisation. According to the United Nations, women are kept out of public life by gender bias and stereotypes, low education levels, and the effects of poverty (Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019).

Research has identified a few key factors that either facilitate or hamper the political participation of women in each society. These factors include the society’s geography, culture, historical traditions, socio-economic status, and political systems (Azuabi, 2016). While most nations have ratified existing international protocols and conventions regarding gender equality and political participation, the low level of women’s representation in government indicates a failure to achieve the goals of such conventions. This represents a violation of women’s fundamental democratic rights. The situation in Africa has been described as seriously flawed because the Continent’s governments have not successfully implemented female empowerment programmes. This is particularly true of programmes meant to protect women against gender-based violence and those meant to ensure their active participation in politics. Research has shown that despite the fact that many African states have signed and committed themselves to programmes supporting gender parity in political participation, such initiatives have not materialised (Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019; Rop, 2013).

The South African government has introduced initiatives aimed at women’s full participation at all levels of the economy. Such initiatives have been described as key in dismantling existing barriers to full participation in the economy. Many believe that such participation will be the foundation of economic prosperity, equity, and inclusive growth. This policy declaration is key to recognising the aspirations of the country’s Constitution (RSA Department of Women, 2015).

6.5  Step 5: ward committees and community governance

Most research on political participation in South Africa has focused on the effectiveness of existing democratic mechanisms and the operational deficiencies of these mechanisms at all levels of civic life. Special attention has been paid to the political empowerment of marginalised groups, including women and the poor. Crucial to this research is an analysis of the ward committees: their functions, politics and possibilities.

Ward committees, which are compulsory in terms of the Municipal Structures Act, can make recommendations on issues concerning their ward, their ward councillor and their city’s municipal government. Sections 74(a) and (b) of the Act allow the municipal council to delegate additional powers and duties to the ward committees (RSA, 1998).

These committees do not wield executive powers. Their primary function is to serve as “independent advisers” to members of the local municipal councils. But this does not mean the committees are powerless. In fact, ward committees could be an important mechanism for expanding democratic participation and empowering marginalised
people in local governance. The ward committees embody the ideal of participatory democracy, in which members of the community put forth their own ideas, beliefs, and interests. Leveraging this democratic mechanism could lead to the creation of community groups and citizens’ associations that strengthen civil society. These organisations would be well positioned to deal directly with the community’s challenges, such as service delivery, as explained in Section 17 of the Act.

Such initiatives are instrumental in helping the creation of tangible community alliances that collectively represent the interests of entire communities throughout the country. Such alliances can only flourish when all elected leaders at all state layers’ respect collective responsibility, accountability, honesty, transparency, and the democratic processes.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

As infection rates drop and immunity increases; and the world at large adapts to functioning post-Covid-19, it is likely that South African society will enter a new transitional period. During such a time, the country must confront its greatest challenges such as the existing economic and social devastation, as well as the immunity of corrupt politicians and representatives of the private sector who have undermined the country’s recovery mechanisms and trust. This was done through state capture, corruption in government and the private sector. It is now necessary to collectively decide whether the new economy will entrench or disrupt existing inequalities. The success of a new, more equitable society can only succeed by including and supporting the majority of its citizens.

As South Africa enters its transitional period, its professed constitutional values such as accountability, transparency, accountability, and honesty will be tested. Public trust in government will likely only rise when there is an honest acknowledgement and address of the country’s economic decline, the high levels of corruption, poverty, and its structural inequalities.

Covid-19 has proven that the sad reality that public social safety nets cannot be successful without mass political public participation. Sadly, this did not take place because of the existing health and social circumstances. Such public participation can only be successful if and when it results in a broad alliance that embraces key societal values embraced by the majority. In the South African context, the values must be ones that confront the realities of poverty, inequality, unemployment, homelessness, social and economic exclusion, crime, corruption and gender-based violence.

South Africa’s constitution is based on the belief that the country’s citizens are the foundation of its existence. This means that public participation and engagement are of key importance for the creation of a peaceful and prosperous country.

Such a public participation process could be the foundation in the process of a constant evolution of a more equitable society and progressive forward-looking developmental economy and society. Certainly, such progress must address the sweeping corruption that resulted in atrocities such as the withholding of food from the starving masses and the hoarding of PPE throughout Covid-19. Government accountability and transparency must be ensured.

Decisions that come from well-organised public participation, in alliance with an engaged civil society, will be instrumental in the reorientation of public administration. The ongoing problems of corruption and inefficiency in local government can be remedied if a strong democratic foundation is built.

Public participation initiatives will lead to important advances in freedom, justice, safety, and social equality. Political freedom has been achieved in South Africa, but millions still dream of social and economic freedom, and many are struggling to make sense of their lives in the face of ongoing socio-economic inequality.

In light of these difficulties, public participation in government will be fundamental to the success of South Africa’s democracy. Effective participation is the result of societal coordination, synergy, co-operation, and societal/community integration. It is no exaggeration to say that public engagement in democratic processes will be a fundamental element of South Africa’s transition to a more just post-Covid-19 world.

This is not a utopian vision. It is a historical necessity.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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