

STRATEGIES ENHANCING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN LOCAL
GOVERNMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THULAMELA LOCAL MUNICIPALITY.

by

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DECLARATION

I, Mulaudzi Mulisa Elijah (Student no: 19017034), at this moment, declare that this research for the Master of Administration in Public Administration, titled "STRATEGIES ENHANCING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THULAMELA LOCAL MUNICIPALITY," submitted to the Department of Public & Development Administration at the University of Venda, has not been submitted previously for any degree at this or another university. It is original in design and execution, and all reference material contained therein has been duly acknowledged.

Mulaudzi M.E

03 April 2025

Student Date

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my grandmother, Mrs Sarah Thivhakoni Mulaudzi. Your words of wisdom and encouragement contributed significantly to my academic achievement. My daughter Mulaudzi Mudodzwa Mulisa, and my siblings Fhatuwani, Kone, Vhuhwavho, and Muthaduli.

ABSTRACT

This study investigated strategies for enhancing community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality. Community engagement is critical to effective governance and service delivery in local municipalities. The extent of community involvement in municipal services has been inconsistent, leading to a gap between public expectations and service provision. Through a comprehensive literature review, the research examines critical themes such as the role of communication, public engagement, transparency, and accountability in fostering community engagement. The researcher used a mixed research methodology. Quantitative data was gathered through a structured questionnaire distributed to residents and municipal employees, allowing for statistical analysis of current engagement levels and public satisfaction with municipal services. Qualitative data was collected through a Semi-structured interview schedule, while quantitative data was collected through a structured questionnaire from community leaders, municipal officials, and other stakeholders. The study used the pragmatic approach paradigm and convergent research design to allow the simultaneous collection of quantitative and qualitative data. The study used purposive sampling to select the techniques of skilled and knowledgeable respondents, experienced and knowledgeable respondents, and a probability sampling technique to ensure a representative sample of participants and allow for the generalization of findings to the broader population. The data analysis process involved combining quantitative and qualitative methods, including using techniques such as SPSS Statistics 29 and Microsoft Excel for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data following Creswell's steps. This dual approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the issue from multiple perspectives. This pragmatic approach paradigm framework offered practical recommendations for improving communication channels, increasing community engagement in decision-making processes, and fostering a culture of accountability within the municipality. The findings from this study can potentially be valuable to policymakers, municipal managers, and community leaders, as they provide insights into practical strategies for improving community engagement in local governance.

Key findings of the study:

- Current engagement practices are more consultative than collaborative, leading to dissatisfaction among residents.

Recommendation based on findings of the study:

- The Municipality should establish sustained and inclusive community engagement platforms to enhance participation and accountability in governance.

Keywords: Community engagement, Citizen participation, Municipal services, Service delivery, Thulamela Local Municipality.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CFO: Chief Financial Officer

COVID-19: Coronavirus Disease 2019

ICT: Information and Communication Technology

IDPs: Integrated Development Plans

IAP2: International Association for Public Participation

ICMA: International City/County Management Association

IT: Information Technology

ITU: International Telecommunication Union

NVivo: (Software for qualitative data analysis, acronym inferred from brand name)

OECD: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

SPSS: Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNDP: United Nations Development Programme

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This study investigates strategies to enhance community engagement in local governance within Thulamela Local Municipality. The active engagement of community people in planning, decision-making, and executing projects meant to improve local governance and service delivery is known as community engagement (Msenge & Nzewi, 2021). Bua and Bussu (2021) state that the country's democratic framework encourages participatory governance to strengthen accountability and responsiveness at all government levels. According to Modise (2023), effective community engagement allows locals to voice their concerns, share their expertise, and work with local government representatives to solve socioeconomic issues. It promotes openness, increases confidence, and makes governing procedures more inclusive, especially in underprivileged and marginalized communities. Socioeconomic disparities, digital exclusion, and a lack of municipal resources frequently hamper successful engagement initiatives. This chapter provides an overview of the study, including the introduction and background, problem statement, research aim, objectives, and questions. It also addresses the study's significance, delimitations, definitions of operational terms, and methodological approach while considering ethical principles and the research structure.

1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

This study investigates strategies to enhance community engagement with the local government in Thulamela Local Municipality. Additionally, it examined the current state of community engagement in the municipality. It assessed potential strategies that can be implemented to improve community engagement in the delivery of municipal services. Community engagement in local government supports democracy, social cohesion, and service delivery (Rijal, 2023). In Thulamela Local Municipality, Community engagement may democratically and realistically solve local municipality socio-economic issues. Participatory governance, social responsibility, and community-driven development may help local governments engage residents (Ndou, 2021).

Researchers like Smith (2020) and O'Brien and Sykes (2021) have underlined the need for community engagement in local government to improve transparency, responsibility, and service delivery. Smith (2020) argues that community-based participatory governance improves local government. O'Brien and Sykes (2021) say community engagement and participatory budgeting minimize corruption and promote government responsiveness. Community engagement helps reduce corruption by increasing transparency, public scrutiny, and accountability. When citizens are involved in decision-making, they can monitor government actions, challenge decisions, and ensure that resources are used appropriately. Participatory budgeting, in particular, allows communities to oversee fund allocation, making corruption harder. Thulamela Local Municipality faces both obstacles and opportunities in implementing these principles. Economic, resource, and regulatory constraints may limit community participation in its activities. Bush (2020) argues that local governments lack the resources and capabilities to engage communities. They think community engagement may be worthless without aid and funding. The digital gap and socioeconomic barriers hinder inclusive community involvement (Chitiga & Matunhu, 2020).

Despite these constraints, Thulamela Local Municipality engages communities in various initiatives, events, and decision-making processes. Digital technologies and social media allow communal governance. Digital platforms may improve local government-resident communication, feedback, and management (Nkomo & Kanyane, 2022). Thulamela Local Municipality's cultural and social capital may promote community-driven development by answering demands using local knowledge and resources (Nciweni, 2023). Improving community connection in Thulamela Local Municipality is both a desirable and challenging goal due to various factors, including financial constraints, limited resources, regulatory hurdles, socioeconomic disparities, geographic factors, and cultural and linguistic diversity. These challenges make it difficult to invest in community initiatives, implement engagement programs, streamline administrative processes, address social divisions, overcome logistical barriers, and effectively communicate with and reach diverse populations. Effective implementation of community engagement projects requires a deep understanding of the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors that influence community-government relations. Flexible strategies will be essential to

overcome these challenges and effectively meet the diverse needs and aspirations of the community. This study explored Thulamela Local Municipality's community involvement methods, issues, and possibilities to advance participatory governance and community-driven development in local government (Nciweni, 2023).

This research was prompted by the growing importance of community engagement in local government, particularly in South Africa's democratic consolidation. Thulamela Local Municipality's socio-economic and cultural differences make it a fascinating case study of community interaction (Makhanikhe, 2022). Applying insights from this research, improving democratic governance and enhancing service delivery within the municipal government can be crucial in promoting social justice and equity (Msenge & Nzewi, 2021). By effectively tackling the identified challenges and capitalizing on opportunities for community engagement, the municipality can promote increased engagement, transparency, and accountability in decision-making processes (Kgobe, Mabeba & Mamokhere, 2023). This ensured that the needs and voices of all residents, especially those from marginalized communities, were acknowledged and considered.

This study assessed strategies to enhance community engagement with the local government in Thulamela Local Municipality. Community engagement is vital, but socioeconomic gaps, bureaucratic inertia, and poor municipality-constituent communication make implementation difficult (Mbatha, 2020). Strategies to enhance community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality were investigated in this study, along with the critical hurdles to effective engagement and strategic solutions to increase communication and collaboration between the municipality and its neighborhoods. This requires a thorough analysis of community engagement strategies, their efficacy, and how technology and social capital might be used to promote more inclusive and participatory governance. Through a comprehensive analysis of community engagement methods, their effectiveness, and the utilization of technology and social resources, the study sought to address the identified hurdles and enhance communication and cooperation between the municipality and its communities (Ndou, 2018) by delving into the complexities of community engagement in the context of Thulamela Local Municipality, the research aimed to develop a more responsive, transparent, and accountable municipal governance structure. Ultimately, the study hopes to bridge the gap between the Thulamela Local Municipality and its residents, ensuring that community voices are heard, needs are met, and decision-

making processes are inclusive and reflective of the diverse perspectives within the municipality (Maemu, 2021).

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The problem to be investigated is the challenges surrounding community engagement in the governance and service delivery processes of Thulamela Local Municipality. Despite efforts by the municipality, the extent and effectiveness of community participation remain unclear and may be influenced by various structural, technological, and socio-economic factors (Kala & Bagri, 2018). The disconnect between the municipality and its citizens hampers effective service delivery and limits opportunities for participatory governance, which is essential in South Africa's democratic framework. The problem is significant, as the inability to engage communities effectively has profound implications. Socio-economic disparities, digital exclusion, and low literacy levels hinder access to participatory platforms, while institutional barriers and mistrust between the government and residents exacerbate the issue (Mbatha, 2020). The digital divide, highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, further limits the municipality's ability to communicate and involve citizens in decision-making processes (Pantić, Cilliers, Cimadomo, Montaña, Olufemi, Torres Mallma & Van den Berg, 2021). Without addressing these challenges, the municipality risks alienating its citizens, weakening democratic accountability, and undermining service delivery quality (Matlhoahela, 2022).

The consequences of this problem are far-reaching. Ineffective engagement reduces transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness in governance, ultimately eroding public trust and satisfaction with municipal services (Heijden, 2019). Moreover, marginalized and vulnerable groups remain excluded from critical decision-making processes, deepening inequality and social division within the municipality. These challenges threaten the municipality's ability to promote social cohesion and meet the diverse needs of its residents (Chitiga & Matunhu, 2020). This study intends to address these challenges by exploring strategies to enhance community engagement in the municipality. Drawing from previous studies, such as Smith (2020) and O'Brien & Sykes (2021), it identifies best practices in participatory governance, such as leveraging digital tools, fostering trust, and promoting inclusive decision-making. The study aims to develop practical solutions addressing socioeconomic disparities, digital

gaps, and institutional barriers by integrating traditional and digital engagement approaches. This approach aligns with the principles of participatory democracy and community-driven development, ensuring a more inclusive and accountable governance structure for Thulamela Local Municipality.

1.4 AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study was to investigate strategies for enhancing community engagement in local government in Thulamela Local municipality.

1.4.1 Research Objectives

- To identify the current state of community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality.
- To identify the key factors influencing community engagement in municipal service delivery within Thulamela Local Municipality.
- To assess the potential of digital technologies to improve community engagement with the local government in Thulamela Local Municipality.
- To recommend strategies to enhance community engagement in municipal services in Thulamela Local Municipality.

1.4.2 Research Questions

- What is the current state of community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality?
- What are the key factors that influence community engagement in municipal service delivery within Thulamela Local Municipality?
- What is the potential of digital technologies in enhancing community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality?
- What strategies can be recommended to enhance community engagement in municipal services in Thulamela Local Municipality?

1.5 JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

Community engagement is crucial for local governance systems, especially within Thulamela Local Municipality, to foster active engagement and collaboration with residents. This study understood how undeveloped towns like Thulamela Local

Municipality interact with their communities. Despite the growing literature on participatory governance and community engagement, such communities' unique challenges and promises are understudied. Thulamela Local Municipality's community engagement is better understood by this study, enriching participatory democracy, social cohesion, and local government theories (Smith, 2020; O'Brien & Sykes, 2021).

Reviewing barriers and local possibilities, the research recommends improving governance, service delivery, and public confidence. This study is critical because local governments want more transparency, accountability, and responsiveness (Bush, 2020; Chitiga & Matunhu, 2020). This study informed governance strategies that prioritize community engagement as a democratic foundation. The research can uncover engagement drivers and impediments to creating scalable policy reforms outside Thulamela Local Municipality. The study's policy impact promotes inclusive, participatory, and effective governance (Nkomo & Kanyane, 2022).

1.6 DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

A study's scope, focus, and bounds depend on its limits. The delimitations for the research on community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality clarify the study's limits and highlight the researcher's choices. This study is limited to Thulamela Local Municipality within the Vhembe District Municipality to investigate strategies enhancing community engagement in municipal services. The Thulamela Local Municipality is the primary research setting due to its unique characteristics and developmental context. By confining the study to Thulamela Local Municipality, the research aimed to derive context-specific insights to inform targeted strategies for enhancing community engagement in municipal services.

1.7 OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS OF THE STUDY

Operational definitions define key terms and ideas to help readers and stakeholders understand the study. This section outlines Thulamela Local Municipality community engagement study operating terminology.

Community Engagement: For this research study, "community engagement" by Madzonga (2023) is defined as the active participation of community members, residents, and other stakeholders in the decision-making, policymaking, and local

governance processes of the Thulamela Local Municipality. This aligns with the definition provided by Coburn Gormally (2020), which describes community engagement as "the process of working collaboratively with community groups, residents, and other stakeholders to address issues that impact the well-being of those who live and work in a particular geographic area, to build strong, sustainable communities." Additionally, the research drew on the definition from the Ocloo, Garfield, Franklin & Dawson, (2021), which describes community engagement as "the process of involving people who may be affected by the decisions made or recommendations developed."

Service delivery: Service delivery can be defined as the performance of work or duty by an official, an act of helping others, or power to control or use resources, or an organization or system providing the public with something useful or necessary (Osborne, 2020). Service delivery is a set of principles, standards, policies, and constraints to be used to guide the designs, development, deployment, operation, and retirement of services delivered by a service provider to offer a consistent service experience to a specific user community in a specific business context (Kalonda, & Govender, 2021). Regarding the above definition, service delivery can be viewed as producing or performing, handing over, taking goods to the intended recipient, or producing results as promised or expected.

Local Governance: Lekala (2019) refers to local governance as the process by which local authorities, institutions, and communities collectively manage and administer affairs within a specific geographic area. According to Richards (2024), local governance is "the system through which local authorities exercise authority and manage public resources, services, and policies in their respective communities." Zwane and Matsiliza (2022) define local governance as "the process of decision-making and implementation of policies and services by locally elected officials, government administrators, and community stakeholders to address the needs and priorities of a specific locality." In the context of this research study on Thulamela Local Municipality, local governance was operationalized as the processes, structures, and mechanisms through which the local government, community organizations, and citizens collectively manage and administer the provision of municipal services and address the needs and priorities of the Thulamela Local Municipality community.

Participatory Governance: Participatory governance is "a process of participatory decision-making where the civil society actors, including citizens, communities, and organizations, are involved in the design, implementation, and monitoring of policies and programs that affect them" (Falanga & Ferrão, 2021). Mosley & Wong (2021) defines participatory governance as "a process of collaborative decision-making where the state and citizens work together to design and implement policies and services that respond to their needs and priorities." In this research study, participatory governance was operationalized as the extent to which the Thulamela Local Municipality involves citizens, community organizations, and other stakeholders in the decision-making, design, implementation, and monitoring of municipal service delivery policies and programs.

Social Cohesion: Holtug (2021) defined social cohesion as the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members, including marginalized groups, through fostering trust, inclusivity, and social integration. Social cohesion is "the glue that holds societies together, characterized by a sense of belonging, inclusion, and mutual support among individuals and groups, regardless of differences in ethnicity, religion, or socioeconomic status" (Orazani, Reynolds & Osborne, 2023). In the context of this research study, social cohesion was operationalized as the extent to which the strategies and initiatives implemented by the Thulamela Local Municipality foster a sense of belonging, trust, and mutual support among the diverse communities and groups within the municipality and the degree to which these strategies contribute to the overall well-being and inclusion of all residents, including marginalized groups.

Digital Divide: The concept of the "digital divide" in this research study refers to the gap between those who have access to digital technologies and those who do not, including differences in internet access, digital literacy, and technological skills. This definition is aligned with Grishchenko's (2020) understanding of the digital divide as "the gap between those who have access to digital technologies and those who do not, including differences in internet access, digital literacy, and technological skills. Furthermore, the research also considered the International Telecommunication Union's (ITU) definition of the digital divide as "the disparity in access to and use of ICTs between different socioeconomic groups, regions, and demographic populations,

resulting in unequal opportunities for social and economic development" (Van Dijk, 2020).

Establishing these operational definitions early in the study provides a clear and consistent framework for studying the complex community engagement and governance dynamics within Thulamela Local Municipality. This upfront definition of key terms and parameters is crucial, allowing the methodology section to revisit and expand upon these concepts in greater detail. By laying this groundwork early on, the study can ensure a robust and well-structured approach to data collection and analysis, ultimately leading to more meaningful and reliable insights about the Thulamela Local Municipality's community engagement and governance processes (Mabizela, 2023).

1.8 STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

This study is divided into essential chapters that thoroughly examine the research issue. This style allows for a logical flow of information and arguments, helping readers grasp the study's scope, findings, and knowledge contributions.

Chapter 1: Introduction: This chapter outlines the study's background, problem statement, aim, objectives, and research questions, as well as the justification, limitations, operational definitions, and ethical considerations. It concludes with an overview of the dissertation structure, which serves as a road map for the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review: The literature review chapter brings together theories, models, and real-world studies critical to community engagement, local governance, and participatory practices. It looks at other research that has been done on the problems and chances of getting more people involved in local government and finds gaps that this study tries to fill. This part lays out the study's theoretical basis and places it in the larger academic conversation.

Chapter 3: Methodology: This chapter discusses the study design, approach, and ways data were gathered and analyzed. The choice of a mixed-methods approach and how the data was collected through conversations, questionnaires, and document analysis are explained. Techniques for sampling, finding participants, and social

issues are all discussed. This chapter also discusses the methods used to examine the data and ensures that the study process is straightforward and can be repeated.

Chapter 4: Data Presentation, Interpretation, And Analysis of Result: This chapter presents the data collection and analysis outcomes according to the study's research questions and objectives. Using quantitative and qualitative data, it covers Thulamela Local Municipality community involvement techniques, impediments, and facilitators. This chapter critically assesses the data in light of the study questions, revealing the challenges of community engagement in local governance.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations: The final chapter synthesizes the findings, discusses their implications, and offers recommendations for enhancing community engagement. It also highlights the study's limitations and suggests areas for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Community engagement in local governance has been widely debated, particularly regarding its role in enhancing participatory democracy, improving service delivery, and fostering trust between governments and citizens (Heijden, 2019). While some scholars emphasize the potential of digital tools and social capital to bridge the gap between municipalities and communities (Putnam, 2000; Kyne & Aldrich, 2020), others highlight persistent barriers such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, socioeconomic disparities, and limited technological access (O'Brien & Sykes, 2021; Bush, 2020). In the case of Thulamela Local Municipality, these challenges are further compounded by historical mistrust, resource constraints, and diverse cultural and linguistic dynamics (Kgobe, 2024). This chapter critically examines existing literature on community engagement frameworks, historical trends, challenges, and opportunities within municipal governance. It explores theoretical perspectives such as Social Capital Theory, Deliberative Democracy Theory, and Participatory Democracy Theory to provide a foundation for understanding engagement dynamics (Putnam, 2000; Janković, 2022; Arnstein, 1969; Fung, 2006). Global and local case studies are analyzed to identify best practices and context-specific gaps (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Tshishonga, 2019). The chapter aims to situate Thulamela's engagement challenges within broader scholarly debates and highlight areas where further research is needed.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Theoretical frameworks for community engagement provide a structured approach to comprehending, analyzing, and executing strategies to involve community members in decision-making, policy development, and collaborative initiatives (Huang, Keng-Yen et al., 2018). The study draws on theories from multiple disciplines, such as sociology, political science, and public administration, to develop a framework that explains the principles, dynamics, and factors shaping community engagement practices. Theories that support community engagement are provided below; in doing this, a theory relevant to this study is identified. These Theories are Social Capital Theory, Deliberative Democracy Theory, and Participatory Democracy Theory.

2.2.1 Social Capital Theory

As Putnam (2000) conceptualized, Social Capital Theory refers to the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit within a community. This theory posits that robust social networks and shared trust enable communities to collaborate, fostering social cohesion and improving governance outcomes. Social capital is categorized into bonding social capital (relationships within groups), bridging social capital (connections across diverse groups), and linking social capital (vertical relationships between individuals and institutions) (Kyne & Aldrich, 2020). Social Capital Theory is relevant to this study because it provides a framework for understanding how Thulamela Local Municipality can leverage trust and relationships to enhance community engagement (Maemu, 2021). High levels of social capital can lead to increased civic participation, better communication between the government and citizens, and more effective implementation of community-driven initiatives. In the context of Thulamela, fostering trust between the municipality and its residents is crucial for overcoming barriers such as socioeconomic disparities, historical distrust, and digital exclusion (Kgobe, 2024).

The municipality can create inclusive engagement mechanisms by strengthening social capital through collaborative partnerships with local organizations, traditional leaders, and community groups (Kgobe, 2024). For instance, trust-building initiatives like transparent communication, acknowledgment of regional expertise, and community recognition programs can encourage engagement and ownership of municipal projects. As Endris, Kibwika, Obaa, and Hassan (2020) note, leveraging social capital can enhance service delivery, promote social justice, and effectively address marginalized groups' needs. Social Capital Theory also emphasizes the role of community networks in disseminating information and mobilizing engagement (Zhang, Yu, and Tian, 2024). Thulamela Local Municipality can tap into these networks to bridge communication gaps, increase awareness about participatory opportunities, and foster a culture of active citizenship. By aligning governance strategies with the principles of Social Capital Theory, the municipality can promote inclusivity and achieve sustainable community development (Endris, Kibwika, Obaa, and Hassan, 2020). This highlights the potential of the theory to bridge communication gaps and

make the audience feel optimistic about the future of community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality.

2.2.2 Deliberative Democracy Theory

Deliberative Democracy Theory emphasizes the importance of inclusive and reasoned dialogue among citizens and between citizens and government representatives in decision-making processes (Janković, 2022). This theory argues that for democracy to be effective, it should go beyond simple voting mechanisms to incorporate active deliberation, where participants can exchange ideas, justify their positions, and reach collective decisions through reasoned discussion (Öberg, 2022). In this context, deliberative democracy fosters mutual understanding and trust, addressing the complexities of governance and societal diversity. The theory supports this study by highlighting the transformative potential of creating platforms where Thulamela Local Municipality community members can voice their concerns, share experiences, and contribute meaningfully to governance decisions. Deliberative Democracy Theory can transform traditional governance models into participatory systems by ensuring equitable engagement from diverse stakeholders (Banerjee, 2022). Such an approach not only helps to mitigate the marginalization of vulnerable groups by incorporating their perspectives into decision-making processes but also inspires hope for a more inclusive and just society.

The municipality is crucial in facilitating deliberative processes prioritizing inclusivity and equity through community forums, participatory budgeting, and structured consultations. Kraai (2023) asserts that successful deliberative practices are characterized by authenticity, representativeness, and consequentiality, meaning that participants' inputs genuinely shape decisions. Thulamela Local Municipality could adopt these principles to overcome challenges such as limited public trust, inadequate communication, and social inequality. This reassures the audience about the practicality of the proposed solutions. Deliberative Democracy Theory encourages open, respectful, and equitable discussions to strengthen governance and community engagement (Ruminski, Reedy, and Black, 2021).

2.2.3 Participatory Democracy Theory

The Participatory Democracy Theory of Arnstein (1969) and Fung (2006) supports this study. Real democracy requires active, meaningful engagement in life-changing decisions (Parvin, 2021). Arnstein's 1969 "Ladder of Citizen Participation" explains how democracy involves non-participation, tokenism, and citizen power. Fung (2006) advocates "Empowered Participation," which improves policy efficiency and equality. A comprehensive approach for analyzing community engagement and participatory governance's transformative power. This concept highlights the significance of equipping community members with the necessary knowledge, resources, and decision-making authority to engage in governance processes actively. Empowered engagement strives beyond superficial engagement, providing genuine avenues for community members to shape policy, deliver services, and allocate resources (Adams, 2017). Through improving policy efficiency and promoting equality, empowered engagement is crucial in creating more inclusive and responsive governance systems that effectively address communities' diverse needs and priorities (Glass & Newig, 2019).

2.2.3.1 Relevancy of Participatory Democracy Theory

The study used Participatory Democracy Theory to investigate and promote community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality. Participatory Democracy Theory has a solid democratic base. It encourages citizen engagement in decision-making, which is democratic (Elstubb, 2018). The study uses this idea to improve democratic governance in the Thulamela Local Municipality, giving community people a real say in policies and projects that affect them. Participatory Democracy Theory also analyses government-community power dynamics. The theory comprehensively assesses local governance power distribution and exercise by defining citizen engagement from non-participation to actual citizen power (Fung, 2006). This research helps detect tokenistic or marginalized citizen engagement and informs strategies to strengthen communities and increase their decision-making authority.

Participatory Democracy Theory emphasizes empowerment in community interaction. It advocates for giving citizens the knowledge, resources, and decision-making capacity to actively engage in governance (Fung, 2006). The study focuses on

empowerment to promote meaningful and transformative community involvement, moving beyond consultation to actual government-citizen collaboration. The theory supports policy effectiveness and equality, justifying its application in the study. Researchers like Parvin (2021) argue that empowered involvement enhances policy outcomes and governance equity. This perspective is used to discover how community engagement might improve policy efficiency and promote equitable resource and opportunity distribution in the municipality.

2.2.4 Justification for Theoretical Framework

Integrating Social Capital Theory, Deliberative Democracy Theory, and Participatory Democracy Theory provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality, shaping the study's methodology, data analysis, and recommendations. Social Capital Theory highlights the role of trust, networks, and relationships in fostering engagement, guiding the study in assessing whether social ties facilitate or hinder participation while also informing strategies to leverage local networks and partnerships for improved collaboration. Deliberative Democracy Theory emphasizes reasoned dialogue, inclusivity, and collective decision-making, which will be used to evaluate the quality of public participation mechanisms in Thulamela, identifying whether engagement processes are substantive or merely symbolic, and recommending deliberative models such as participatory budgeting and structured consultations to enhance citizen involvement. Participatory Democracy Theory focuses on citizen empowerment and shared governance, allowing the study to assess whether community participation moves beyond consultation toward meaningful decision-making power, highlighting barriers such as digital exclusion and institutional resistance, and proposing mechanisms to strengthen participatory governance. Combining these perspectives ensures a holistic analysis of community engagement, using Social Capital Theory to examine trust and relationships and deliberative Democracy Theory to assess engagement quality. Participatory Democracy Theory will evaluate the extent of citizen influence, guide data collection and interpretation, and make policy recommendations to foster inclusive, trust-based, and participatory governance in Thulamela Local Municipality.

2.3 HISTORICAL TRENDS IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement in South Africa has evolved significantly over the past few decades, reflecting broader political, social, and technological changes. Before the end of apartheid, community engagement was largely restricted and exclusionary, with local governance structures heavily controlled by the state. Under the apartheid regime, local communities had little to no involvement in governance decisions, particularly those of marginalized groups (Tshishonga, 2019). Engagement was top-down, with the state making decisions without consultation from most of the population. Following the democratic transition in 1994, community engagement experienced a fundamental shift. The newly elected government implemented inclusive policies to ensure that all citizens, particularly previously marginalized communities, had a voice in the governance process. Introducing Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and ward committees marked the beginning of formalized community involvement in municipal governance. These mechanisms were intended to give local communities a platform to participate in decision-making, contributing to developing and implementing development projects (Tshishonga, 2019). Despite these efforts, the early years of post-apartheid community engagement often faced bureaucratic inertia and tokenistic participation challenges, where communities were consulted but not always meaningfully engaged (OECD, 2001).

In the 2000s, the increasing role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) began to transform the landscape of community engagement. Digital platforms, such as social media, mobile applications, and e-government initiatives, began to provide new opportunities for participation. These platforms allowed for broader and more immediate interaction between municipalities and citizens, promoting transparency and accountability (United Nations Development Programme, 2006). However, the benefits of these technological advancements were unevenly distributed, with many rural and disadvantaged communities unable to access these tools due to the digital divide. As a result, while technology enhanced governance in some areas, it also deepened existing socio-economic disparities, limiting the inclusivity of engagement efforts (van Dijk, 2006).

In recent years, there has been a global shift towards more participatory governance models, where citizens are not just consulted but are given more direct influence over

decisions, particularly in budgeting and policy-making. Internationally, models such as participatory budgeting have gained traction, allowing citizens to allocate municipal funds (Baiocchi, 2005) directly. In South Africa, some municipalities have experimented with participatory budgeting and other forms of community-driven governance, though these models have not been consistently implemented nationwide. The trend towards co-governance, where government and citizens collaborate in decision-making, has also gained attention as a way to foster more inclusive and accountable governance (United Nations Development Programme, 2006). The historical trends in community engagement in South Africa reflect a movement from exclusion to inclusion, from top-down governance to more collaborative and participatory practices. While significant strides have been made in ensuring that communities have a voice in governance, challenges related to socioeconomic inequalities, digital access, and institutional inertia continue to affect the effectiveness of community engagement initiatives (OECD, 2001; van Dijk, 2006). These trends highlight the need for a nuanced approach to community engagement that considers local socio-political and economic contexts.

2.4 CHALLENGES TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement is crucial, yet obstacles exist. Bureaucratic inertia, capacity, and resource constraints limit local government involvement (O'Brien & Sykes, 2021). They usually lead to tokenistic engagement that removes community members from decision-making. Socioeconomic differences limit community involvement. Poverty, unemployment, and inequality in Thulamela Local Municipality may prevent vulnerable groups from ruling (Bush, 2020). The digital divide worsens these discrepancies by depriving a large population of community engagement tools and platforms (van Dijk, 2006). Digital engagement is less inclusive and representative when participation is unequal. Thulamela Local Municipality's participatory governance is hampered by community involvement strategy history and obstacles (Maemu, 2021). Despite gains, institutional inertia, socio-economic inequities, and the digital divide need a nuanced approach to community engagement that considers local context and approaches these issues using conventional and new means (Bush, 2020).

2.5 OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN THULAMELA LOCAL MUNICIPALITY

Social capital comprises networks, norms, and trust that enable mutual benefit coordination and cooperation (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Thulamela Local Municipality culture and social media engage communities. Mansuri & Rao, 2013, further indicate that local resources encourage engagement, ownership, and government-resident relations. The rich cultural legacy and social institutions of Thulamela Local Municipality provide unique engagement tactics that promote inclusion and community action. Thulamela Local Municipality's culture and economy foster policy innovation and local governance. Thulamela Local Municipality may use agile governance ideas like adaptation, learning, and inclusion to include its communities (Ratshitanga, 2021). This approach promotes the Thulamela Local Municipality to adapt to changing circumstances and public engagement, creating a dynamic, resilient government that can solve problems and grab opportunities (Pahl-Wostl, 2009).

2.6 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO STUDYING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies is essential for researching community engagement. This approach allows for measuring program effectiveness, engagement, and participation. Qualitative techniques, such as interviews, reveal community member's and local government officials' views, experiences, and intentions, providing a more complex understanding of engagement (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A mixed-method Methodological Approach is necessary because quantitative and qualitative data complement each other, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the community engagement process.

Mixed-methods research examines community engagement quantitatively and qualitatively. Methodological pluralism triangulates data, improving research reliability. Mixed methods are excellent for reviewing complex social phenomena like community engagement, where numerous factors impact outcomes. Mixed-methods research can illuminate Thulamela Local Municipality's complicated community engagement for policymakers and practitioners (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

2.7 GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN MUNICIPAL SERVICES

Understanding the geographical context of community engagement in municipal services requires examining community interaction in various socio-political and economic contexts within South Africa (Katsaura, 2012). While Thulamela Local Municipality is the focus of this research, it is beneficial to consider engagement strategies, outcomes, and challenges in other South African towns. For instance, the Western Cape's Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) have successfully increased service delivery and local government through participatory budgeting and community planning (Molale, 2019). This approach has allowed for greater community engagement and government decision-making, highlighting the potential benefits of such engagement methods in Thulamela Local Municipality.

Moreover, participatory budgeting, which originated in Porto Alegre, Brazil (Baiocchi, 2005), and community-based planning in Kerala, India (Isaac & Heller, 2003), have demonstrated the potential for new engagement methods to enhance community engagement and local development. Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and community-based planning in Kerala, India, allow communities to influence decision-making and resource allocation. While successfully promoting transparency and inclusivity, both methods face challenges like political resistance, low participation, and resource limitations. For Thulamela Local Municipality, adapting these strategies would require overcoming local issues like digital exclusion, socioeconomic disparities, and institutional barriers to ensure effective community engagement. These examples can provide valuable insights for Thulamela Local Municipality in developing strategies to improve community engagement in municipal services. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the experiences and lessons learned from other South African towns in developing engagement strategies for Thulamela Local Municipality. The municipality can build on existing knowledge and develop tailored engagement strategies that address the area's unique socio-political and economic contexts (Katsaura, 2012).

2.8 SYNTHESIS AND GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

The literature review shows that political and social situations affect how people interact with their communities, that long-term engagement depends on official support and ability, and that technology can help close engagement gaps (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Despite these insights, there is insufficient context-specific study on Thulamela Local Municipality's unique community engagement challenges and opportunities. To fill this gap, this study looked at Thulamela Local Municipality's background, used culture and social capital from the area, and looked at foreign involvement programs in South Africa.

2.9 CONCLUSION

The literature review reveals that community engagement is influenced by various factors, including geography, socio-politics, and economics. South African and international case studies offer valuable insights into enhancing community participation, with examples like participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre and community-based planning in Kerala demonstrating promising results. However, challenges such as political resistance, resource constraints, and low participation persist in these models. Thulamela Local Municipality faces unique barriers, such as socioeconomic disparities, digital exclusion, and institutional inertia, which could hinder the successful implementation of these methods. Despite these challenges, the literature highlights the importance of adapting community engagement strategies to local contexts, utilizing social capital, and promoting inclusivity to improve governance and service delivery. This study explored how these strategies can be effectively tailored to the needs and conditions of Thulamela Local Municipality, filling the gap in context-specific research and enhancing participatory governance.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

According to Taherdoost (2022), research methodology refers to the overall approach to the research process. On the other hand, Saharan, Kulhari, Jadhav, Pooja, Banerjee, and Singh (2020) define research methodology as the methodology that includes the study's design, setting, sample, methodological limitations, and data collection and analysis techniques. This chapter outlined the research methodology, design, and specific procedures for conducting this study. It details the sampling method, data collection techniques, data analysis processes, ethical considerations, and the study's limitations. This chapter aimed to explore the best strategies for increasing community engagement among residents of Thulamela Local Municipality while addressing potential challenges and opportunities. Specifically, this section describes the research design and methodology employed in the study. It overviews the study area and population and explains the sampling method and sample size. The chapter also discusses the data collection methods, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations to ensure the integrity of the research. According to Saharan, Kulhari, Jadhav, Pooja, Banerjee & Singh (2020), research is a scientific approach to answering a research question, solving a problem, or generating new knowledge. It involves a systematic and orderly process of collecting, organizing, and analyzing information to provide valuable insights for decision-making. This chapter followed this scientific approach to offer meaningful conclusions for the Thulamela Local Municipality study.

3.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

A research paradigm is the overarching framework or philosophy guiding a researcher's approach to a study. According to Creswell & Creswell (2017), a research paradigm defines the researcher's perspective on reality, knowledge, and inquiry processes. This framework impacts all elements of the research, including the formation of research questions, the choice of methods, the interpretation of findings, and how new knowledge is created (Bryman, (2016). Pragmatism is the research paradigm that was used for this study. It is based on the belief that researchers should use the philosophical and methodological approach that best addresses complex

social problems. Pragmatism prioritizes practicality and flexibility over rigid principles, allowing researchers to choose methods based on the research question rather than being constrained by a single philosophical approach (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). By adopting pragmatism, this study combined quantitative and qualitative methods to comprehensively understand the strategies for enhancing community engagement in municipal services in Thulamela Local Municipality. The pragmatism paradigm allows for a flexible and adaptive approach to research, focusing on practical problem-solving and the effectiveness of methods in addressing real-world issues.

3.2.1 Justification for Using Pragmatism

This study fits well with the Pragmatism paradigm, which emphasizes the practical application of research to address real-world problems, focusing on what works best to find solutions rather than adhering to a single philosophical stance (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). The complex and context-dependent nature of community-municipal relationships in Thulamela Local Municipality aligns with the Pragmatist view that reality is multifaceted and dynamic. By adopting a Pragmatist approach, this study combined qualitative and quantitative methods to comprehensively understand the strategies that enhance community engagement. The goal is to identify effective practices that can be applied to improve participatory governance in Thulamela Local Municipality's unique socio-economic and cultural setting.

Pragmatism's flexibility allows the researcher to select methods based on their appropriateness in answering the research questions rather than being constrained by the philosophical assumptions of a single paradigm. This enables the study to draw on diverse perspectives and data sources to develop practical, context-sensitive solutions to the challenges of community engagement in municipal services (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019).

3.3 RESEARCH METHODS

Leedy and Ormrod (2010) describe research methodology as the general approach a researcher takes to conduct a research project. Similarly, Karunarathna, Gunasena, Hapuarachchi & Gunathilake (2024) define research methodology as encompassing the design, setting, sample, methodological limitations, and techniques used for data collection and analysis in a study. This study adopted a mixed-method approach,

integrating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The most suitable mixed-method approach for the study is the mixed-methods participatory approach. This approach effectively integrates qualitative and quantitative methodologies, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of community engagement dynamics.

According to Regnault, Willgoss, and Barbic (2018), mixed-method research employs a well-defined design that explicitly combines qualitative and quantitative mechanisms to produce a unified set of evidence for a single research question. Likewise, Cameron (2011) points out that mixed-method research involves qualitative and quantitative components, though challenges may arise in articulating how the two elements relate. This approach is suitable for the study, as it allows for examining both the qualitative aspects of community engagement, such as attitudes, experiences, and opinions and the quantitative aspects, like service usage statistics and response rates to municipal programs.

This study used a quantitative research method to collect statistical data using questionnaires. Bryman (2012) describes quantitative research as emphasizing quantification in data collection and analysis, adopting a deductive approach where the goal is to test existing theories. In line with Taherdoost (2022), quantitative research can be employed to answer relational questions about variables and often includes strategies such as experimental and correlational studies. The quantitative dimension of this research aimed to provide explanations and predictions that could be generalized to other contexts. This method suits the study by allowing quantified aspects such as service utilization, engagement rates in municipal events, and satisfaction levels with municipal services.

On the other hand, qualitative research methods included interviews and observations to gather opinions, views, and facts from selected municipal personnel and community members. As defined by Bryman (2012), qualitative research usually emphasizes words over quantification in the collection and analysis of data, focusing on an inductive approach to theory development. The qualitative aspect of this study aimed to describe and understand human behavior within a social context. This approach is appropriate for exploring community perspectives, identifying common themes in their experiences with municipal services, and understanding the nuances of their engagement.

3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

According to Akhtar (2016), research design is defined as the arrangement of conditions for the collection and analysis of data in a manner that aims to combine relevance to the research purpose with economy and procedure. Research design refers to the overall strategy or blueprint outlining the approach and methods used to conduct a research study. It encompasses decisions about the research questions, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, and the overall structure of the questionnaire (Taherdoost, 2022). This study utilized a convergent research design because it is most suitable for this study as it allows for the simultaneous collection of quantitative and qualitative data, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the strategies for enhancing community engagement in municipal services. This design facilitates the integration of diverse data sources and methods, ensuring a robust analysis and interpretation of the findings. By combining quantitative data on community engagement levels with qualitative insights into stakeholders' challenges and opportunities, the convergent research design provided a holistic view of the community engagement practices in Thulamela Local Municipality (Finlay & Kobayashi, 2018). Additionally, this design aligns well with exploratory research design, which was adopted as it allows for an in-depth exploration of community engagement strategies while utilizing qualitative narratives and quantitative metrics to enrich the overall understanding of the subject matter.

3.5 STUDY AREA

The study area is Thulamela Local Municipality, located in the Limpopo province of South Africa. Thulamela Local Municipality encompasses a diverse landscape, with approximately 49 villages of varying sizes, populations, and infrastructure. This diversity reflects the rich cultural and social dynamics within the municipality, providing a suitable context for exploring community engagement strategies (Sen & Nagendra, 2020). As a local government entity, Thulamela Local Municipality is responsible for providing municipal services to its residents. Understanding the strategies that enhance community engagement in these services is crucial for improving participatory governance and addressing the needs of the local population. Focusing on a specific municipality rather than a broader geographical area allows the researchers to understand the study context deeply. This enables a comprehensive

and nuanced exploration of the social dynamics, challenges, and opportunities related to community engagement within Thulamela Local Municipality (Nciweni, 2023). The findings from this study on Thulamela Local Municipality provided valuable insights and recommendations that can be applied to enhance community engagement in municipal services, not only in Thulamela Local Municipality but potentially in other similar local government contexts in South Africa and beyond. By concentrating the research on Thulamela Local Municipality, the study can delve into the unique socioeconomic, cultural, and political factors that shape community engagement in this specific setting. This in-depth, context-rich approach aligns with the convergent research design, enabling the researchers to develop a comprehensive understanding of the strategies that can effectively enhance community engagement in municipal services.

Figure 1: Vhembe District Municipality map



Figure 1: Vhembe District Municipality map [source: Municipalities.co.za. (2017).

3.6 POPULATION OF THE STUDY

Population in research refers to the study object, encompassing individuals, groups, organizations, human products, events, or the conditions they are exposed to (Mohajan, 2020). It is the complete set of cases from which a sample is drawn, representing the group of potential participants for generalizing study results (Casteel & Bridier, 2021). In the context of research questions, the population comprises

individuals or entities with relevant characteristics or experiences (Lim, 2024). The study was conducted within the Thulamela Local Municipality, situated in the Vhembe District of the Limpopo Province, South Africa. This municipality spans approximately 2,920 square kilometers and has a population of around 618,462 residents (Statistics South Africa, 2022). For this mixed-methods study, the target population included the municipal manager, mayor, chief financial officer, senior managers, spokesperson, traditional leaders, non-managerial municipal employees from different units, ward councillors, and community members of the Thulamela Local Municipality, totalling approximately 618,462 individuals (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Given the municipality's vastness, community members were purposively sampled from Wards 40, 24, and 22. These wards were selected to ensure diverse representation, considering factors such as population size, level of municipal service provision, and varying degrees of community engagement. This approach enabled the study to capture various perspectives regarding municipal services and participatory governance.

3.7 SAMPLING

Webster (1985) defined a sample as a finite part of a statistical population whose properties are studied to gain information about the whole. Sampling is a crucial step in research design, as it allows the researcher to gather data from a manageable number of subjects representing the broader population. Bhardwaj (2019) defines sampling as a procedure to select a sample from an individual or a large population for a specific research purpose, and Ikechukwu (2021) further describes sampling as the process of choosing a subset of individuals from within a defined study population to participate in the research. The sample for this study was drawn from the target population, which includes residents, local government officials, and civil society organizations within the Thulamela Local Municipality. The study employed purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, to select participants based on their knowledge, roles, and involvement in community engagement within Thulamela Local Municipality. This approach ensured that key stakeholders such as municipal officials, ward councillors, traditional leaders, non-managerial municipal employees, and community members were included in the research. According to the latest census

data, the Thulamela Local Municipality has a total population of approximately 618,462 (Statistics South Africa, 2022).

3.7.1 Sample size

RVSPK, Priyanath & Megama (2020) define sample size as the technique of selecting the number of observations to include in a sample. It is an essential step in research design as it allows the researcher to gather data from a manageable number of subjects representing the broader population. Sample size in qualitative research refers to the number of participants selected to participate. Unlike quantitative research, where sample size calculation is based on statistical principles, sample size determination in qualitative research is guided by theoretical saturation, which occurs when no new information or themes emerge from additional data collection. However, understanding the population size can still inform the sampling strategy (Bryman, 2016). While sample size determination in qualitative research is not based on statistical calculations, having a sense of the population size can guide researchers in determining the appropriate sample size to achieve theoretical saturation (Xu, Baysari, Stocker, Leow, Day, and Carland, 2020). It helps in planning the sampling strategy and ensuring that an adequate number of participants are included to capture the breadth and depth of experiences within the population.

For qualitative research, sample size determination is typically guided by theoretical saturation rather than statistical calculations. However, estimating the population size can inform the sampling strategy. Given that theoretical saturation is the guiding principle for sample size determination, the researcher started with one hundred twenty (120) participants and continued data collection until no new themes or insights emerged, indicating theoretical saturation had been reached. The sampling size was as follows: (01) municipal manager, (05) senior managers, (01) spokesperson, (05) traditional leaders, (10) non-managerial municipal employees from different units, (10) ward councillors, and (88) community members.

3.7.2 Sampling Technique

According to Robbins (2009), sampling is selecting elements from a sampling frame, and a sample is a representative subset of the population. For this study, the researcher employed a mixed sampling technique combining purposive and random

sampling. Purposive sampling was used to select key informants such as municipal officials (e.g., municipal manager, senior managers), traditional leaders, and ward councillors, as these individuals possess rich, relevant knowledge and experience in community engagement within the Thulamela Local Municipality. According to Patton (2015), purposive sampling targets individuals who can provide in-depth insights into the research problem. For the community members, the researcher employed stratified random sampling. This approach ensured that different villages, socioeconomic groups, and demographic characteristics were represented in the sample. The community members were selected to capture diverse perspectives on community engagement. The sample size for community members was determined based on theoretical saturation, with 88 individuals chosen to participate, ensuring a broad range of opinions and experiences. In total, 120 participants were selected, combining purposive sampling for key informants and stratified random sampling for community members, ensuring a comprehensive and representative understanding of community engagement in the municipality.

3.7.3 Sampling Frame

According to Casteel & Bridier (2021), the sampling frame is “a list or source that provides a complete representation of the population from which a sample will be drawn for a research study. It serves as the basis for selecting participants or sampling units, ensuring that the sample is representative of the target population.” Having a well-defined sampling frame is crucial for ensuring that every member of the population has an equal opportunity to be included in the sample. Utilizing a sampling frame allows researchers to effectively reduce selection bias, ensuring that all population segments are included (Casteel & Bridier, 2021). With a sampling frame, the sampling process becomes more efficient and organized, providing a systematic approach to participant selection. Utilizing a sampling frame enhances the generalizability of research findings by ensuring that the sample is representative of the entire population rather than just a specific subset. A well-defined sampling frame improves the transparency and accountability of the research process (Yin et al., 2014).

This study sampled municipal managers, directors, spokespersons, traditional leaders, non-managerial municipal employees from different units, ward councillors,

and community members. To comprehend municipality-wide community engagement, the sample included gender, age, and socioeconomic status. The study's methodology and sample design evaluate Thulamela Local Municipality's community engagement, difficulties, and potential. The case study technique and purposive sampling provide rich, contextual data that may influence engagement efforts.

3.8 DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Data collection involves gathering information from various sources to support research or analysis, as Bryman (2016) describes. This process requires a structured approach to collect, record, and organize data methodically to address research questions, test hypotheses, or achieve research objectives. Given the research topic, effective data collection is critical to understanding the current state of community involvement, identifying challenges, and proposing strategies for improvement. This study employed a mixed-method approach, utilizing qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. The data collection procedures include questionnaires and interviews. These methods complement each other by providing numerical and narrative data, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of community engagement within the municipality.

3.8.1 Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative data collection was conducted by administering questionnaires to a representative sample of residents from Thulamela Local Municipality. Questionnaires are an efficient tool for rapidly gathering a substantial amount of data, as highlighted by Patil (2014). Rani (2012) defines questionnaires as a means of collecting quantitative primary data in a standardized manner, ensuring internal consistency and coherence for subsequent analysis. The researcher opted for structured questionnaires due to their ability to reach many people quickly, easily, and efficiently, often utilizing postal questionnaires. Before initiating data collection, the researcher scheduled appointments with potential respondents. One hundred and ten (110) respondents were provided with structured questionnaires to complete. The 110 quantitative respondents include municipal officials, three traditional leaders, seven ward councillors, four senior managers, nine non-managerial municipal employees, and 86 community members. The questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale,

offering the following options: Strongly Agree, Agree, Not Sure, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. As (Xu, Baysari, Stocker, Leow, Day, and Carland, 2020) emphasized, quantitative data is crucial in generating empirical evidence to support research findings and conclusions. The questionnaire aimed to gather statistical information regarding residents' engagement in municipal services, their satisfaction levels, and suggestions for enhancing community engagement. This quantitative data provided a comprehensive understanding of community trends and behaviours.

3.8.2 Qualitative Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews serve as a significant source of qualitative data. According to Patil (2014), an interview is a meeting where somebody is asked questions to discover their views. An interview schedule was used as another instrument to collect data. The researcher used open-ended questions to interview the participants because it allowed them to include more information, including feelings, attitudes, and understanding of the subject. Ten (10) participants were interviewed face-to-face, asking them open-ended questions. The 10 qualitative participants comprised 1 Municipal Manager, 1 Mayor, 1 Chief Financial Officer, 1 Spokesperson, 3 Senior Manager, 1 Traditional Leader, 1 Ward Councillor, and 1 Community Member who provided deeper insights. The researcher made appointments to interview participants. According to (Lim, 2024), qualitative data collection facilitates direct interaction with participants, allowing in-depth exploration of their perspectives, experiences, and opinions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with municipal officials and community leaders to gather insights into their views on community engagement. These interviews were guided by open-ended questions, encouraging respondents to share their experiences and opinions in detail. The questions addressed various aspects of community involvement, including cultural and social resource utilization, engagement challenges, and proposed solutions. Interviews offer a platform for residents to discuss their experiences, fostering a collaborative environment where ideas and concerns can be shared. These discussions help explore community dynamics and identify common themes in engagement patterns.

3.9 DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis refers to systematically inspecting, cleaning, transforming, and interpreting data to uncover meaningful patterns, insights, and conclusions (Alem, 2020). This study's data analysis was crucial in understanding community engagement factors and identifying effective strategies to improve engagement. The study employed a mixed-method approach involving quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques within the same framework (Taherdoost, 2022). By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the researcher gained a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing community engagement in municipal services in Thulamela Local Municipality.

3.9.1 Analysis of Quantitative Data

Quantitative data collected through questionnaires was analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Statistics 29. The data was presented using frequencies and percentages, which allowed the researcher to identify trends and patterns in the responses. The Microsoft Excel software was also used to systematically convert the frequency of respondents into percentages, providing a clear and concise representation of the data. Specific statistical techniques such as chi-square tests were employed to examine relationships between categorical variables, while regression analysis may be utilized to assess predictors of community engagement levels.

3.9.2 Analysis of Qualitative Data

Qualitative data collected from interviews was analyzed using a thematic approach in narrative form. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Christou, 2022). This approach was selected for its flexibility and capacity to describe data in depth and complexity. It is beneficial for research to understand community engagement in a given environment (Thompson Burdine, Thorne, and Sandhu, 2021). Qualitative data was analyzed using NVivo software or similar qualitative data analysis tools to facilitate thematic analysis. This software allows for systematic coding and organization of themes derived from interview transcripts, enhancing the rigour of qualitative findings.

The data analysis process in this study involved a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques, including the use of SPSS Statistics 29 and Microsoft Excel for quantitative data analysis and thematic analysis for qualitative data. By employing a mixed-method approach, the researcher gained a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing community engagement in municipal services in Thulamela Local Municipality.

3.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

According to Xu, Baysari, Stocker, Leow, Day, and Carland, (2020), ethics refers to a “set of moral principles, values, and standards that govern the conduct of individuals or groups within a particular context or profession.” Gordon (2020) describes ethical considerations as the principles or guidelines differentiating acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. During this study, adherence to ethical standards was rigorously maintained. The moral issues that were upheld include the following:

3.10.1 Permission to conduct the research.

Conducting research within the context of a local municipality requires the researcher to obtain permission from the relevant authorities. In the case of this study on "Strategies enhancing community engagement in municipal services in Thulamela Local Municipality," the researcher needed to follow a structured process to ensure ethical and transparent data collection. Firstly, the researcher requested that the University of Venda conduct the study. The university then issued an ethics clearance letter granting the researcher permission to gather data for the research project (Xu, Baysari, Stocker, Leow, Day, and Carland, 2020). Secondly, the researcher requested a letter of permission from the Thulamela Local Municipality. This letter authorized the researcher to access pertinent documents or data and effectively coordinate with the municipality's local officials and community leaders. The university's ethics clearance letter and the municipality's permission letter were presented to the participants before the researcher could begin conducting interviews or administering the questionnaire. This step ensures that the participants know the researcher's legitimacy and the study's adherence to the appropriate ethical protocols. By following this structured approach, the researcher can navigate the permissions and approvals required to find

within the Thulamela Local Municipality while maintaining transparency and ethical conduct throughout the data collection process.

3.10.2 Informed Consent

Ethics need informed consent for human research. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, methods, risks, and benefits to assist them in deciding to participate. Before data collection, participants got permission documents outlining the experiment and collecting signed consent. It respects participants' autonomy and right to informed engagement choices. (Arellano, Alcubilla & Leguízamo, 2023).

3.10.3 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity are vital in sensitive research that may compromise participants' privacy or well-being. The project anonymized all data and assigned participants pseudonyms or codes to protect their identity in reports and publications. Participant data is protected and only accessible to the research team (Haneef & Agrawal, 2024)

3.10.4 Risk Minimization

Although this study has modest risks, any harm to participants was carefully considered and minimized. The research design and interview questions were assessed to ensure participant comfort. Participants can leave the study without penalty if problems emerge (Gray, Wong-Wylie, Rempel & Cook, 2020).

3.10.5 Ethical Approval

Institutional review board or ethics committee approval was sought from the University of Venda before starting the study. This assures that the research idea has been independently examined and meets the highest ethical standards. To ensure ethical compliance, the approval process adds another layer of control (Head, 2020).

3.10.6 Handling Sensitive Information

Given the focus on community interaction, participants may reveal sensitive material about their experiences or opinions. Researchers were trained to handle such

information sensitively and discreetly, ensuring courteous and empathic talks. To protect participants, sensitive data was treated confidentially (Head, 2020).

The study adhered to these ethical principles to ensure scientific integrity and human dignity. Ethics are a regulatory obligation and the foundation of reliable research. This study used rigorous ethical standards to gain insight into community engagement activities in Thulamela Local Municipality while protecting participants' safety, rights, and well-being.

3.11 CONCLUSION

The research methodology employed for the study on community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to ensure a thorough and well-rounded understanding of the subject matter. Utilizing a mixed-methods design, the research delves into Thulamela Local Municipality as a representative unit for analysis, allowing for a comprehensive examination of community engagement dynamics within a specific context. Qualitative data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, such as local government officials, community leaders, and representatives from civil society organizations. These interviews explored participants' viewpoints, first-hand experiences, and valuable insights on community engagement practices, obstacles, and potential within the municipality. Quantitative data was gathered through questionnaires distributed to a representative sample of residents in Thulamela Local Municipality. These questionnaires enabled the researchers to quantitatively assess community engagement, satisfaction with municipal services, and perceptions of the effectiveness of various engagement strategies. Every aspect of the research was guided by ethical considerations, encompassing obtaining informed consent from participants, maintaining confidentiality, and adhering to ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects. The research methodology prioritizes transparency, rigour, and respect for participant rights and privacy. With a meticulous and methodical approach to data collection and analysis, the study sought to provide valuable insights into successful strategies for enhancing community engagement. This, in turn, promoted inclusive governance and local development in Thulamela Local Municipality. The next chapter presents data presentation, interpretation, and analysis.

CHAPTER 4: DATA PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This study aimed to explore strategies enhancing community engagement in local government in Thulamela Local municipality. The previous chapter presented the research design of the empirical investigation and the subsequent research methodologies that guided this study. The data analysis involves an interpretation of what participants have shared, both in structured responses and in narrative accounts, as a basis for understanding the findings of this investigation. This chapter will discuss the analysis and interpretation of the collected data, focusing on the responses of the sampled population. The following sections answer the study's central questions, offering insights into the nature of community engagement in local governance. The data was collected using quantitative and qualitative methods. Questionnaires provided quantitative data, while interviews were used to collect qualitative insights from municipal officials, councillors, and community members. The responses to the questionnaire items are presented in graphical and tabular formats, followed by a brief synthesis of the findings for each item. Responses to the interview items are presented in narrative form and analyzed thematically, with findings also synthesized to provide deeper insights. Detailed findings will be discussed in chapter five (5). Since this research study applied a mixed-method approach, the presentation of data is organized into two key themes: analysis of data collected through questionnaires and analysis of data collected through interviews. 120 respondents participated in this study, with 110 completing the questionnaires and 10 engaging in interviews. All participants were selected from the Thulamela Local Municipality.

4.2 PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION, AND ANALYSIS OF DATA COLLECTED THROUGH QUESTIONNAIRES

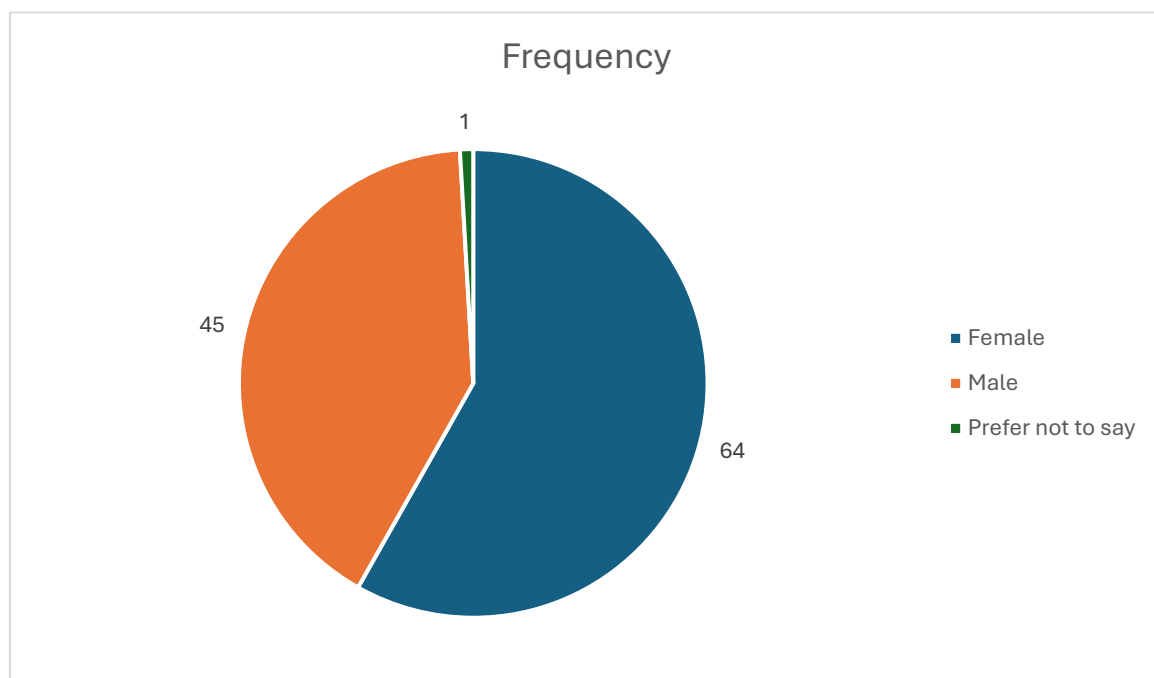
This section presents, interprets, and analyses the data collected through questionnaires and consists of two sub-sections, namely, sections A and B. Section A focuses on the demographic characteristics of respondents, and Section B examines respondents' perspectives on community engagement strategies. The information is displayed in graphic tables with frequencies and percentages, followed by a brief synthesis. This section is divided into two sections: Section A, which focuses on the

demographic characteristics of respondents, and Section B, which examines respondent's perspectives on community engagement strategies.

4.2.1 Section A: Biographical details of the respondents

The researcher presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents who participated in the study. The information is displayed in graphic tables with frequencies and percentages, followed by synthesizing the findings. The demographic characteristics of respondents are presented in terms of gender, age, educational attainment, and participant category as follows:

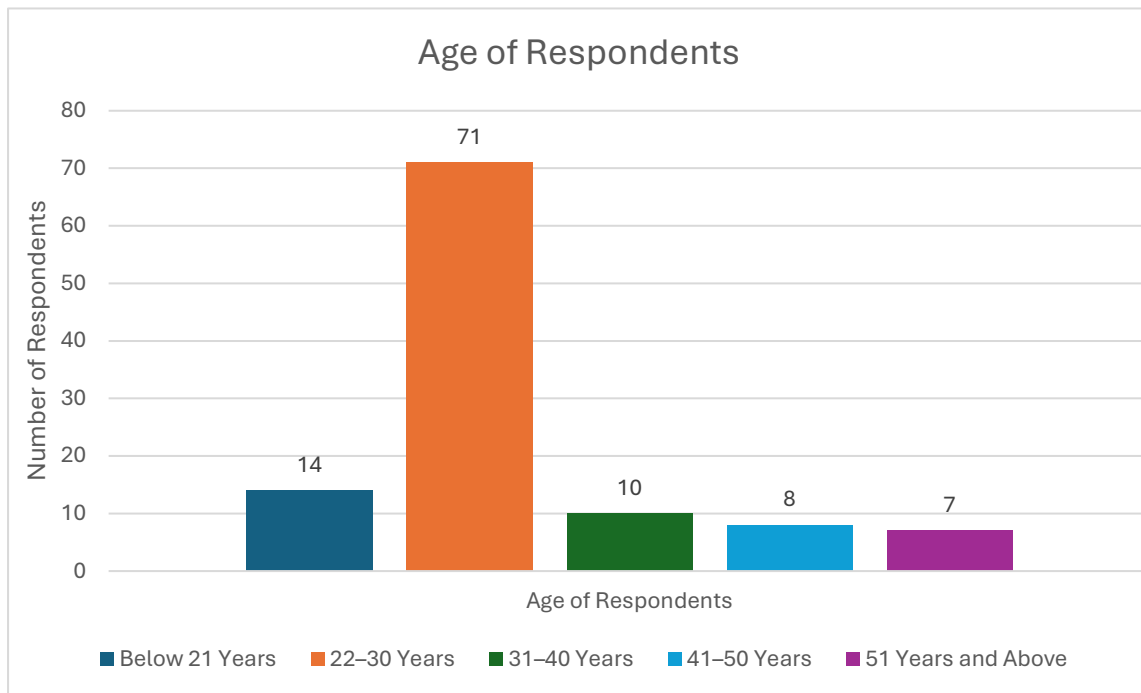
Figure 2: Gender of Respondents



Source: Own source

Figure 2 above indicates the respondent's biographical data in terms of gender. The figure further indicates that of the 110 respondents, 64 (58.2%) were female, whereas 45 (40.9%) were male, and 1 respondent (0.9%) preferred not to disclose their gender. As shown above, the findings indicate that most of the study's participants were female. The researcher suggests that this gender distribution highlights the diversity in community engagement initiatives.

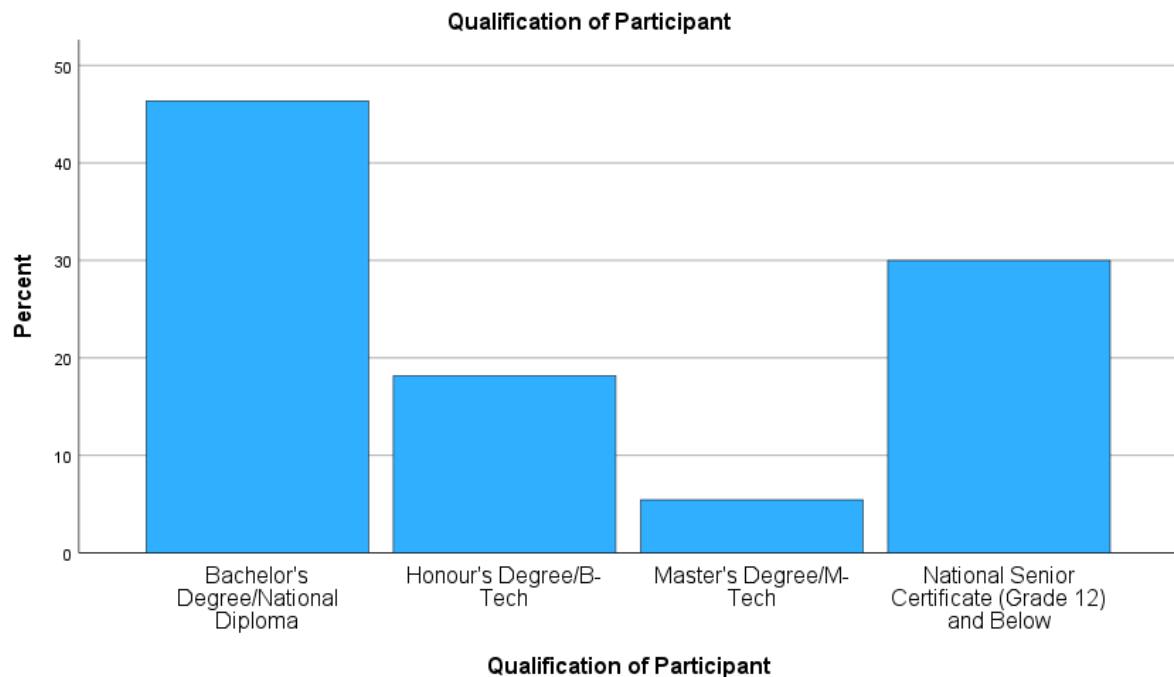
Figure 3: Age of Respondents



Source: (Own Source)

Figure 3 presents the age of the respondents. The data shows that the majority, 71 (64.5%), were aged 22–30 years; as shown in the above figure, 14 respondents (12.7%) were under 21. The figure further indicates that smaller proportions of participants were aged 31–40 (9.1%), 41–50 (7.3%), and 51 years and above (6.4%). It may be concluded from this study that the involvement of young people was higher than that of middle-aged and older respondents. Young people may be more willing to participate and understand the purpose of the study, which could be the cause.

Figure 4: Qualification of the Respondents



Source: (Own source)

Figure 4 shows the qualifications of the respondents, wherein the majority (46.4%) held a bachelor's Degree or National Diploma, while 30.0% had a Grade12 or below. The above figure further indicates that respondents with Honour's and Master's degrees accounted for 18.2% and 5.4%, respectively. Therefore, it can be concluded that most community members in Thulamela Local Municipality have a bachelor's degree or diploma as their highest level of education.

Table 1: Category of Respondents

Category of Respondents	Frequency	Percentage
Community Member	86	78.2%
Non-managerial Municipal Employees	9	8.2%
Ward Councillor	7	6.4%
Senior Manager	4	3.6%
Traditional Leader	3	2.7%
Municipal Manager	1	0.9%
Total	110	100%

Source: (Own Source)

Table 1 indicates the categories of respondents who participated in this study by providing information through the questionnaire. The table indicates that of the 110 respondents, the majority, 86 (78.2%), were community members, followed by non-managerial municipal employees (8.2%) and ward councillors (6.4%). The data also indicates that senior managers, traditional leaders, and municipal managers represented smaller proportions within the targeted number of respondents. The findings demonstrate that the study included diverse stakeholders, with community members forming the largest group. This composition is crucial for assessing community engagement strategies effectively.

4.2.2 Section B: Community Engagement in Municipal Services

The researcher presented, analysed, and interpreted data on community engagement in municipal services in this section. The information is presented in tabular formats, developed from the questionnaire items, with frequencies and percentages, then synthesizing the findings. This sub-section is divided into themes based on the study's objectives: the role of community engagement in improving municipal services, the benefits of participatory governance, and the challenges affecting effective engagement.

The questionnaire findings provided quantitative insights into the perceived benefits of community engagement. However, qualitative data from interviews was also analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of these themes. The following section synthesizes these interview responses to complement and enrich the questionnaire results, providing a more nuanced perspective on the role of community engagement within the Thulamela Local Municipality.

4.2.2.1 The Role of Community Engagement in Improving Municipal Services

In this theme, the researcher presents the data regarding the role of community engagement in improving municipal services. The data is presented in tabular format with frequencies and percentages, followed by a brief synthesis.

Table 2: Involving the community in decision-making can improve municipal service delivery.

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	75	68.2%
Agree	32	29.1%
Not Sure	2	1.8%
Disagree	1	0.9%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0%
Total	110	100%

Source: (Own Source)

Data collected shows that most respondents, 75 (68.2%), strongly agreed that involving the community in decision-making improves municipal service delivery. Additionally, 32 (29.1%) agreed with this statement. This table also shows that only 2 (1.8%) respondents were uncertain, and 1 (0.9%) disagreed with the statement. A conclusion can be made that these results suggest a widespread agreement that community engagement in decision-making leads to more effective and relevant service delivery. The findings emphasize the importance of creating platforms for the community to contribute to the planning and implementation of municipal services. The results presented above closely align with the principles of Participatory Democracy Theory, which emphasizes that meaningful community involvement in decision-making enhances governance and service delivery. Most respondents (68.2% strongly agree, 29.1% agree) believe community engagement improves service delivery. This

supports the theory's principle of empowering citizens to make decisions that affect their lives.

Table 3: Community engagement helps to create a sense of ownership among residents

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	56	50.9%
Agree	49	44.5%
Not Sure	3	2.7%
Disagree	2	1.8%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0%
Total	110	100%

Source: (Own Source)

Table 3 shows that half of the respondents, 56 (50.9%), strongly agreed that community engagement fosters a sense of ownership among residents, while 49 (44.5%) agreed. A negligible number were uncertain (3 respondents, 2.7%) or disagreed (2 respondents, 1.8%). It can be concluded that these results indicate that inclusive governance strengthens residents' sense of responsibility and connection to their community, enhancing engagement outcomes. The findings support Social Capital Theory by showing that community engagement fosters a sense of ownership, highlighting the significance of trust and relationships. Additionally, the strong agreement among respondents underscores the principles of Participatory Democracy Theory, which values citizen involvement in decision-making. Together, these results reveal how community ties and active engagement enhance collective responsibility.

Table 4: Engaging the community can increase transparency and accountability in the Thulamela Local Municipality

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	68	61.8%
Agree	40	36.4%
Not Sure	1	0.9%
Disagree	1	0.9%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0%
Total	110	100%

Table 4 above indicates that most respondents, 68 (61.8%), strongly agreed, and 40 (36.4%) agreed that engaging the community enhances transparency and accountability in municipal governance. Only a small percentage, 2 respondents (0.9% each), were unsure or disagreed. The findings highlight that community involvement fosters trust in municipal institutions and reduces the risk of mismanagement, as seen in the many respondents supporting the statement. The findings from the questionnaire strongly support the Participatory Democracy Theory, which emphasizes the importance of active citizen engagement in decision-making processes and governance. The data shows that most respondents (98.2%) agree that engaging the community increases transparency and accountability in the Thulamela Local Municipality. This suggests that when community members are actively involved, they feel more connected to the governance process, which aligns with the principles of participatory democracy.

Table 5: Community input leads to more effective use of resources in service delivery

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	59	53.6%
Agree	44	40.0%
Not Sure	5	4.5%
Disagree	2	1.8%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0%
Total	110	100%

Source: (Own Source)

Table 5 indicates that 93.6% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that community input results in a more effective allocation of resources. This reflects a general perception that when municipalities incorporate feedback from residents, services are more targeted, efficient, and relevant. The small percentage of uncertainty or disagreement (6.3%) suggests that while some respondents may not have experienced tangible improvements through their contributions, the overall sentiment strongly favours participatory planning to optimize resources. The findings from Table 5 strongly support Participatory Democracy Theory, which emphasizes the importance of the active involvement of community members in decision-making processes, reflecting the notion that when citizens participate, their input enhances the effectiveness of service delivery. The data shows that 93.6% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that community input leads to a more effective allocation of resources. This alignment with Participatory Democracy Theory suggests that when municipalities engage residents and consider their feedback, services can be better

tailored to meet the community's needs, resulting in more efficient and relevant outcomes.

Table 6: Collaboration between the community and the Thulamela Local Municipality fosters social cohesion

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	51	46.4%
Agree	46	41.8%
Not Sure	10	9.1%
Disagree	2	1.8%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0%
Total	110	100%

Source:(Own Source)

Table 6 indicates that of the 110 respondents, 88.2% strongly agreed that collaboration between communities and municipalities fosters social cohesion. A conclusion can be made that participatory governance builds trust and solidarity among residents while strengthening their relationship with municipal authorities. The small fraction of respondents who were unsure or disagreed may indicate a lack of direct experience with successful collaborative efforts. On the other hand, the overwhelming majority supports the idea that such partnerships enhance the social fabric and promote unity. The findings of this study support Social Capital Theory. This is evident from the high percentage of respondents (88.2%) who strongly agreed that collaboration between communities and municipalities fosters social cohesion. Social Capital Theory suggests that social networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity enhance

cooperation for mutual benefit. The results indicate that participatory governance builds trust and solidarity among residents, aligning with this theory's core views.

4.2.2.2 Current Status of Community Engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality

This section describes the present state of community engagement within the Thulamela Local Municipality, as respondents perceive it. The analysis includes aspects such as the frequency of updates on engagement initiatives, the health of municipal-community relationships, the level of community involvement in planning, and the effectiveness of current strategies.

Table 7: The Thulamela Local Municipality provides regular updates on community engagement initiatives

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	12	11.0%
Agree	37	33.6%
Not Sure	31	28.2%
Disagree	24	21.8%
Strongly Disagree	5	4.5%
Total	110	100%

Source: (Own Source)

Table 7 indicates that only a portion of respondents (44.6%) believe the Thulamela Local Municipality regularly updates the community on engagement initiatives. A significant 28.2% of respondents were uncertain, while 26.3% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Communication efforts by the Thulamela Local Municipality may need more

consistency, reach, or clarity. The high level of uncertainty could indicate either a need for more awareness among residents or insufficient dissemination of information about engagement activities. The findings from the data presented in Table 7 appear to support the Social Capital Theory, which emphasizes the importance of social networks, trust, and norms that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. The relatively low percentage of respondents (44.6%) who believe that the Thulamela Local Municipality provides regular updates on community engagement initiatives suggests weak communication and trust between the municipality and the community. The high level of uncertainty (28.2%) among respondents indicates that many residents may not feel adequately informed or connected to the municipality's efforts, a key aspect of social capital.

Table 8: The relationship between the Thulamela Local Municipality and the community is healthy

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	9	8.2%
Agree	30	27.3%
Not Sure	26	23.6%
Disagree	33	30.0%
Strongly Disagree	11	10.0%
Total	110	100%

Source:(Own Source)

The above data indicates that less than half of the respondents (35.5%) agree that the relationship between the Thulamela Local Municipality and the community is healthy, while 40% disagreed or strongly disagreed. In addition, 23.6% were uncertain. The

findings from the data support the Social Capital Theory. This theory emphasizes the importance of community relationships, networks, and trust for effective civic engagement and collaboration between the municipality and its residents. In the provided data, only 35.5% of respondents agree that the relationship between the Thulamela Local Municipality and the community is healthy, while 40% disagree or strongly disagree. This indicates a lack of trust and confidence in the municipal-community relationship, a key component of social capital.

Table 9: The community is actively involved in service planning and delivery

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	9	8.2%
Agree	32	29.1%
Not Sure	23	20.9%
Disagree	34	30.9%
Strongly Disagree	11	10.0%
Total	110	100%

Source:(Own Source)

Table 9 indicates that only 37.3% of respondents felt the community is actively involved in service planning and delivery. In contrast, 40.9% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, and 20.9% were unsure. The lack of active engagement may reflect barriers such as insufficient outreach, logistical challenges, or a perception that community input is undervalued in municipal planning. The findings most strongly support Social Capital Theory, as they suggest that low levels of community engagement could stem from insufficient social networks and relationship-building efforts. However, they also indicate shortcomings related to Deliberative and

Participatory Democracy Theories, as lacking engagement suggests a failure to provide adequate platforms for deliberation and engagement. Addressing these issues could foster a more active community role in service planning and delivery.

Table 10: The Thulamela Local Municipality utilizes feedback from the community to improve services

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	11	10.0%
Agree	39	35.5%
Not Sure	21	19.1%
Disagree	25	22.7%
Strongly Disagree	13	11.8%
Total	110	100%

Source: (Own Source)

Based on the above information, just under half of the respondents (45.5%) agreed that the Thulamela Local Municipality uses community feedback to improve services, while 34.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed. The remaining 19.1% were not sure. Therefore, a conclusion can be made that these results indicate that many respondents feel their input could be more effectively incorporated into municipal processes, potentially discouraging future engagement. The findings from the Thulamela Local Municipality's community feedback data support the Participatory Democracy Theory, which emphasizes the importance of individuals' active engagement in democratic processes, particularly in governance and decision-making. The data shows that only a slight majority of respondents (45.5%) feel the municipality utilizes their feedback to improve services. The presence of a significant

percentage (34.5%) who disagreed or strongly disagreed indicates a gap in genuine community engagement and responsiveness from the municipality. This suggests that while there is some level of engagement, it may not be adequate, highlighting the need for improved channels and mechanisms for community input.

Table 11: Current engagement strategies adequately address community needs

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	8	7.3%
Agree	39	35.5%
Not Sure	26	23.6%
Disagree	27	24.5%
Strongly Disagree	9	8.2%
Total	110	100%

Source:(Own Source)

Regarding data presented in Table 11, only 42.8% of respondents believed that current engagement strategies adequately address community needs, while 32.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. A substantial 23.6% were unsure, reflecting either a lack of visibility of these strategies or uncertainty about their impact. From the information above, it can be concluded that there is a gap between municipal efforts and public perception, underscoring the need for better communication and evaluation mechanisms. The findings are most supportive of Social Capital Theory. This theory emphasizes the importance of relationships, networks, and trust within communities for achieving collective action and addressing community needs. The data indicates that only 42.8% of respondents believe current engagement strategies adequately address community needs, while 32.7% disagree or strongly disagree.

This suggests a lack of trust or perceived effectiveness in the existing engagement strategies, which are critical components of social capital. The high percentage of respondents (23.6%) who are unsure indicates a further lack of awareness or connection to the engagement initiatives, which can hinder the development of social capital.

4.2.2.3 Potential of Digital Platforms for Community Engagement

This section examines the perceived potential of digital platforms, such as social media, online portals, and other digital tools, in enhancing community engagement within the Thulamela Local Municipality. The analysis highlights the role of technology in improving communication, accessibility, transparency, and inclusivity.

Table 12: Social media platforms can improve communication with the community

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	48	43.6%
Agree	52	47.3%
Not Sure	5	4.5%
Disagree	3	2.7%
Strongly Disagree	2	1.8%
Total	110	100%

Source:(Own Source)

Table 12 shows that most respondents (90.9%) either strongly agreed or agreed that social media platforms can improve communication between the Thulamela Local

Municipality and the community. This suggests a widespread recognition of social media as an effective tool for real-time updates, feedback collection, and public outreach. The small percentage of disagreement (4.5%) may reflect challenges such as digital literacy or uneven access to technology. The above findings support the Social Capital Theory. This theory emphasizes the role of social networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity in fostering community engagement and collaboration. The high percentage of respondents (90.9%) who either strongly agreed or agreed that social media platforms can improve communication with the community indicates that these platforms are seen as a means to strengthen social ties and enhance interactions between the Thulamela Local Municipality and its residents.

Table 13: Online portals can facilitate access to municipal services for residents

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	44	40.0%
Agree	51	46.4%
Not Sure	9	8.2%
Disagree	4	3.6%
Strongly Disagree	2	1.8%
Total	110	100%

Source: (Own Source)

Table 13 indicates that most respondents (86.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that online portals could make municipal services more accessible. This reflects the potential for digital tools to streamline service delivery and reduce administrative barriers. However, 8.2% of respondents who were unsure suggested that some respondents may need more awareness or experience with such platforms, and 5.4%

who disagreed may face barriers such as a lack of internet access. The above findings support Social Capital Theory. This theory emphasizes the importance of networks, relationships, and trust among individuals within a community, which contribute to collective action and civic engagement. The high percentage (86.4%) of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that online portals can enhance access to municipal services suggests that these tools could foster greater community engagement and collaboration. Online portals can help build residents' trust and networks by improving access to information and services, thus strengthening community social capital.

Table 14: Digital tools enhance transparency by providing real-time information to residents

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	42	38.2%
Agree	55	50.0%
Not Sure	6	5.5%
Disagree	5	4.5%
Strongly Disagree	2	1.8%
Total	110	100%

Source: (Own Source)

Data collected in Table 14 indicates that half of the respondents (50%) agreed, and an additional 38.2% strongly agreed that digital tools improve transparency by providing real-time information. This strong consensus underscores the role of technology in promoting accountability and openness. However, a small minority of respondents (6.3%) were unsure or disagreed with the statement, potentially pointing to issues like limited technological infrastructure or digital exclusion. A conclusion can

be made that the role of technology in promoting accountability is a reassuring finding. The findings support Social Capital Theory most strongly. This theory emphasizes the importance of networks, relationships, and social trust in enhancing community engagement and cooperation. A high percentage of respondents believe that digital tools improve transparency, suggesting that these tools foster connections among residents and strengthen trust in governance. The data indicates that 88.2% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that digital tools enhance transparency. This reflects an environment where social interactions are facilitated by technology, thereby building social capital within the community. The belief in openness can lead to increased civic engagement, as residents feel more informed and empowered to participate in decision-making processes.

Table 15: Using digital platforms for community engagement promotes inclusivity

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	39	35.5%
Agree	57	51.8%
Not Sure	8	7.3%
Disagree	4	3.6%
Strongly Disagree	2	1.8%
Total	110	100%

Source:(Own Source)

Table 15 indicates that 87.3% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that digital platforms promote inclusivity, demonstrating a shared understanding that technology can reduce barriers to engagement, particularly for marginalized groups. This finding

highlights the potential of digital platforms to promote inclusivity and suggests that awareness and capacity-building efforts may be needed to maximize this potential. The findings support the Participatory Democracy Theory. This theory emphasizes the importance of active engagement and involvement of citizens in the decision-making process. The data indicates that a significant majority (87.3%) of respondents agree that digital platforms promote inclusivity, a core principle of participatory democracy. This suggests that technology can facilitate greater engagement among citizens, especially marginalized groups, thus enhancing democratic processes.

Table 16: Digital engagement platforms could reduce logistical barriers to engagement

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	41	37.3%
Agree	56	50.9%
Not Sure	7	6.4%
Disagree	4	3.6%
Strongly Disagree	2	1.8%
Total	110	100%

Source:(Own Source)

According to the data in Table 16 above, most respondents (88.2%) agreed or strongly agreed that digital platforms could overcome logistical challenges to engagement, such as travel costs, time constraints, and geographical distance. A conclusion can be drawn that this finding highlights the potential for digital tools to bridge gaps in accessibility and facilitate more significant involvement in community engagement initiatives. The findings support Social Capital Theory. This theory emphasizes the

value of social networks, relationships, and community trust, which can enhance involvement and engagement. The data indicates that most (88.2%) respondents agree or strongly agree that digital engagement platforms can reduce logistical barriers to engagement. This suggests that such platforms help form and strengthen social connections, enabling individuals to participate more effectively in communal activities. By facilitating access and reducing barriers like travel and geographical distance, digital tools enhance social capital by allowing more people to engage with and contribute to their communities.

4.2.2.4 Barriers to Effective Community Engagement

This section analyzes the obstacles that hinder effective community engagement in the Thulamela Local Municipality. These barriers include technological, financial, socioeconomic, linguistic, and trust-related challenges. The findings are presented in tabular form, followed by detailed explanations to provide deeper insights into the data.

Table 17: Lack of Internet access limits community engagement opportunities

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	52	47.3%
Agree	45	40.9%

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Not Sure	4	3.6%
Disagree	8	7.3%
Strongly Disagree	1	0.9%
Total	110	100%

Source:(Own Source)

The data presented in Table 17 indicates that most respondents (88.2%) either strongly agreed or agreed that lack of internet access is a significant barrier to community engagement. This suggests that the digital divide remains a critical challenge, particularly in rural areas. Only a tiny proportion (8.2%) disagreed or were unsure, indicating that internet access is widely recognized as essential for effective engagement. The findings presented in Table 17 support Social Capital Theory. This theory emphasizes the importance of social networks and community engagement in promoting collective action and civic participation. The data indicates that a significant majority (88.2%) of respondents perceive a lack of internet access as a barrier to community engagement, highlighting how limited connectivity can hinder the development of social capital in a community.

Table 18: Limited financial resources hinder community engagement efforts

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	49	44.5%
Agree	49	44.5%

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Not Sure	5	4.5%
Disagree	6	5.5%
Strongly Disagree	1	0.9%
Total	110	100%

Source:(Own Source)

The data presented in Table 18 indicates that 89% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that financial constraints are a significant barrier to engagement. This highlights the limitations faced by municipalities in implementing and sustaining engagement initiatives, particularly in resource-scarce settings. The minimal disagreement (6.4%) underscores the universality of this challenge across the community. The findings from Table 18 support the Social Capital Theory. This theory emphasizes the value of social networks and relationships in fostering community engagement and involvement. The data suggests that financial constraints significantly hinder community engagement efforts, indicating that when resources are limited, the ability of individuals and groups to connect, collaborate, and participate in civic activities diminishes.

Table 19: Socioeconomic disparities affect the inclusivity of community engagement initiatives

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	37	33.6%
Agree	52	47.3%

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Not Sure	15	13.6%
Disagree	5	4.5%
Strongly Disagree	1	0.9%
Total	110	100%

Source:(Own Source)

The data presented in Table 19 indicates that over 80% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that socioeconomic disparities, such as poverty and unequal access to resources, negatively impact the inclusivity of community engagement initiatives. These disparities likely prevent marginalized groups from fully participating in municipal decision-making. The data indicates that 13.6% of respondents needed clarification, indicating limited awareness of these disparities among specific population segments. The findings presented in Table 19 support the Social Capital Theory. This theory emphasizes the importance of social networks, relationships, and norms in facilitating community cooperation and collective action. The significant percentage (over 80%) of respondents who strongly agreed or agreed that socioeconomic disparities negatively affect the inclusivity of community engagement initiatives suggests that these disparities hinder the building of social capital among marginalized groups. When communities face poverty and unequal access to resources, their ability to engage and cooperate in communal or democratic processes diminishes.

Table 20: Language barriers impact effective communication with the community

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	34	30.9%
Agree	51	46.4%
Not Sure	10	9.1%
Disagree	13	11.8%
Strongly Disagree	2	1.8%
Total	110	100%

Source:(Own Source)

Table 20 above shows that most respondents (77.3%) agreed that language barriers impede effective communication between the Thulamela Local Municipality and the community. This suggests that multilingual engagement strategies are needed to ensure inclusivity. According to the above information, however, 13.6% of respondents disagreed or were unsure, possibly reflecting varying levels of exposure to language-related challenges. The findings from Table 20 support the Social Capital Theory. This theory emphasizes the importance of relationships, networks, and norms that facilitate collective action and enable individuals to communicate effectively within a community. The data indicate that most respondents (77.3%) believe language barriers affect communication between the Thulamela Local Municipality and the community. This highlights a social capital deficit related to effective communication, as language is a crucial connector within social networks. The need for multilingual engagement strategies, mentioned in the findings, aligns with the idea that enhancing

communication channels can strengthen community ties and promote collective action.

Table 21: Insufficient trust between the Thulamela Local Municipality and community members is a barrier

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	55	50.0%
Agree	38	34.5%
Not Sure	11	10.0%
Disagree	3	2.7%
Strongly Disagree	3	2.7%
Total	110	100%

Source:(Own Source)

According to the above information, half of the respondents (50%) strongly agreed, and 34.5% agreed that the lack of trust between the Thulamela Local Municipality and the community hinders engagement efforts. This indicates that rebuilding trust through consistent and transparent communication is critical for successful engagement. Table 22 also shows that only 5.4% of respondents disagreed, highlighting the consensus on trust as a fundamental issue. The findings support Social Capital Theory. This theory emphasizes the importance of trust and relationships within a community for effective collaboration and engagement. The data shows that a significant portion of respondents (84.5% combined strongly agree and agree) believe that insufficient trust between the Thulamela Local Municipality and community members is a barrier to engagement efforts. This aligns with Social Capital Theory, which posits that strong

social networks and trust are crucial for fostering civic participation and collective action.

4.2.2.5 Strategies to Enhance Community Engagement

In this section, the researcher presents the data regarding the strategies identified by respondents as effective means to strengthen community engagement within Thulamela Local Municipality. The following analysis covers regular public meetings, clear communication channels, local leadership involvement, transparency in decision-making, and empowerment through training and workshops.

Table 22: Holding regular public meetings would improve engagement

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	20	18.2%
Agree	42	38.2%
Not Sure	3	2.7%
Disagree	3	2.7%
Strongly Disagree	41	37.3%
Total	110	100%

Source:(Own Source)

The data presented in Table 22 indicates that more than half of respondents (56.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that regular public meetings would improve community engagement. However, the data suggests that a significant proportion (37.3%) strongly disagreed, potentially indicating dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of previous meetings or the logistical challenges associated with attending them. This

shows the need for municipalities to ensure public meetings are well-structured, accessible, and responsive to community concerns. The above findings support Participatory Democracy Theory. This theory emphasizes the importance of active citizen engagement in decision-making processes. The data reveals that most respondents (56.4%) believe holding regular public meetings would enhance community engagement. This suggests a desire for increased involvement in local governance, which aligns with the principles of participatory democracy.

Table 23: Establishing clear communication channels would foster trust

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	18	16.4%
Agree	43	39.1%
Not Sure	4	3.6%
Disagree	3	2.7%
Strongly Disagree	41	37.3%
Total	110	100%

Source: (Own Source)

Regarding the above statement, the data shows that 55.5% of respondents said that clear communication channels will increase trust between the Thulamela Local Municipality and the community. However, the statistics show that 37.3% strongly disagreed, raising doubts about the Thulamela Local Municipality's ability to build or sustain such channels. This emphasizes constant, transparent, dependable communication in establishing trust and confidence. The findings from Table 23 align with the Deliberative Democracy Theory, which emphasizes transparent and inclusive dialogue as essential for building trust in governance. 55.5% of respondents agreed

that clear communication fosters trust, reflects the theory's principle, and instils confidence in its applicability. This agreement underscores the theory's assertion that open communication strengthens relationships between governments and communities. However, the 37.3% who strongly disagreed highlighted skepticism about the municipality's capacity to establish reliable communication, indicating a barrier to practical deliberation.

Table 24: Engaging local leaders in decision-making processes would strengthen engagement

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	19	17.3%
Agree	46	41.8%
Not Sure	4	3.6%
Disagree	1	0.9%
Strongly Disagree	39	35.5%
Total	110	100%

Source:(Own Source)

Regarding the above statement, the researcher found that most respondents (59.1%) supported engaging local leaders in decision-making processes to strengthen community engagement. Local leaders are often seen as trusted intermediaries, and their involvement can enhance representation and responsiveness. It can also be concluded that the 35.5% who strongly disagreed may reflect concerns about favouritism, lack of accountability, or uneven representation. The findings support the Participatory Democracy Theory. This theory emphasizes the importance of engaging citizens in decision-making that affects their lives. The data indicates that a significant

portion of respondents (59.1%) supports engaging local leaders to strengthen community engagement, aligning directly with the core principles of participatory democracy, which advocates for active involvement and empowerment of community members in governance.

Table 25: Providing transparency in decision-making would improve community relations

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	18	16.4%
Agree	49	44.5%
Not Sure	4	3.6%
Disagree	0	0.0%
Strongly Disagree	38	34.5%
Total	110	100%

Source:(Own Source)

According to the above information, almost two-thirds of respondents (60.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that enhanced transparency in decision-making would benefit community relations. Transparency builds trust and ensures that residents' feedback is valued and incorporated. Table 25 above shows that 34.5% strongly disagreed, indicating possible dissatisfaction with previous municipal procedures viewed as unclear or exclusionary. The above findings align with social capital theory as transparency in decision-making builds trust, a key component of social capital, and strengthens the linking of social capital between the municipality and the community. The agreement by 60.9% of respondents indicates that transparency fosters cooperation and shared norms, encouraging collective action. However, the 34.5%

who strongly disagreed reflect dissatisfaction with past unclear or exclusionary practices, signalling a gap in trust that the municipality must urgently address to prevent further erosion.

Table 26: Empowering communities through training and workshops can promote engagement

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	16	14.5%
Agree	53	48.2%
Not Sure	1	0.9%
Disagree	2	1.8%
Strongly Disagree	37	33.6%
Total	110	100%

Source:(Own Source)

Table 26 indicates that most responders (62.7%) preferred empowering communities through training and workshops to increase engagement. A conclusion can be made that education and skill development are essential for meaningful engagement. It can also be concluded that the 33.6% who strongly disagreed may have questioned the availability, accessibility, or effectiveness of such initiatives. Again, results from Table 26 support the Deliberative Democracy Theory by highlighting the importance of education and skill development for meaningful engagement. Training and workshops equip citizens with the knowledge to engage effectively in governance, fostering informed and reasoned dialogue, a core principle of the theory. These initiatives also promote inclusivity, enabling marginalized groups to participate and strengthening authentic engagement. The 33.6% who strongly disagreed highlight concerns about

the accessibility or effectiveness of such programs, suggesting the need for improvements to ensure they are impactful and aligned with community needs.

4.3 ANALYSIS OF DATA COLLECTED THROUGH INTERVIEW

The interview data builds on the quantitative findings by providing a qualitative exploration of community engagement within the Thulamela Local Municipality. This section synthesizes responses from municipal officials, traditional leaders, and community members to delve deeper into the themes identified in the questionnaire results. The thematic analysis offers a nuanced understanding of the motivations, challenges, and strategies related to community engagement, aligning with the study's overarching objectives. Interviews explored critical areas, including the role of community engagement in improving service delivery, perceptions of current engagement levels, barriers to engagement, and strategies for strengthening municipal-community relationships. By analyzing participant narratives, this section provides a complementary perspective to the quantitative data, enhancing the richness of the study's findings. Key themes that emerged from the interviews are presented below.

4.3.1 Question 1: In your view, what role does community engagement play in improving service delivery within Thulamela Local Municipality?

The first interview question aimed to understand how community engagement contributes to improved service delivery within the Thulamela Local Municipality. Participants highlighted the multifaceted benefits of engagement, including aligning services with community needs, fostering collaboration, and promoting accountability. Below are the perspectives expressed by participants:

Participant A

"Community engagement is crucial to match municipal services with citizens' real needs. It promotes trust, guarantees openness, and permits collaborative problem-solving, contributing to more efficient service delivery and sustainable growth."

Participant B

"Community engagement is essential to comprehending the needs and goals of the people we serve. It ensures that actual community input informs our decisions, enhancing service delivery results and promoting teamwork and a sense of responsibility."

Participant C

"Community engagement improves service delivery results by identifying priority projects, ensuring that money is directed to the most needy areas, and encouraging responsibility in using municipal funds."

Participant D

Participant D replied, "Community engagement is essential since it builds trust between the Thulamela Local Municipality and its citizens. Active citizens are more inclined to back projects and help them succeed."

Participant E

"Community engagement is crucial in identifying community-specific needs, guaranteeing inclusivity, and developing collaborative efforts in planning and implementation. It ensures that resources are used effectively, and service delivery matches community priorities."

Participant F

"Community involvement is essential for improving service delivery because it promotes cooperation and confidence between the Thulamela Local Municipality and its citizens. More communication about requirements and input from involved communities' results in more specialized and efficient services."

Participant G

"Engaging the community is essential because it builds mutual trust and cooperation between the Thulamela Local Municipality and its citizens, resulting in more efficient and customized service delivery that addresses the community's needs."

Participant H

"Engagement from the community guarantees that services meet the practical and cultural demands of the community. It allows for more inclusive and efficient governance by bridging the divide between rural and municipal communities."

Participant I

"Community engagement is essential to guarantee that citizens' needs are met, and their views are heard. Tackling actual and particular local issues fosters a sense of ownership among community members and improves the efficacy of service delivery."

Participant J

"Community involvement facilitates collaboration between residents and local government, ensuring that services are adapted to the community's specific requirements."

The participants agreed on the importance of community engagement in improving service delivery within Thulamela Local Municipality. They stressed how engagement connects municipal services to the needs and goals of the community, ensuring efficiency and relevance in service delivery. Several sub-themes evolved, emphasizing the variety of community engagement functions in governance and development. Participants A, B, and G stated that engagement with the community builds trust and collaboration between the Thulamela Local Municipality and its residents. Participant A stressed that engagement promotes transparency and collaborative problem-solving, whereas Participant G stated that mutual trust and cooperation result in tailored service delivery. The emphasis on community engagement leading to trust, collaboration, and cooperation between the Thulamela Local Municipality and its residents aligns well with Social Capital Theory. This theory posits that social networks, norms, and trust facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. The participants highlighted how engagement fosters trust and accountability, essential elements of social capital.

Participants C, D, and E emphasized the importance of engagement in identifying priority projects and directing resources to regions of most need. For example, Participant C stated that community engagement increases responsibility in using municipal funds. At the same time, Participant D underlined that engaged citizens are

more inclined to support and contribute to initiatives' success. Participants F and H emphasized the inclusivity of community engagement. Participant F noted that engagement fosters cooperation and confidence, resulting in specialized and efficient services. Similarly, Participant H stated that inclusive government bridges the gap between rural and municipal communities.

Finally, participants I and J discussed how community engagement promotes a sense of ownership and accountability. Participant, I noted that addressing specific local concerns fosters community ownership, whereas Participant J underlined that engagement between residents and local governments ensures that services are adapted to community needs. According to the participants' replies, community engagement is critical to enhancing service delivery. It generates trust, matches services to community needs, encourages accountability, and promotes inclusion. These findings indicate that the Thulamela Local Municipality's involvement initiatives must be prioritized and strengthened to attain sustainable development objectives. The findings also support Participatory Democracy Theory, stressing the importance of citizen involvement in decision-making processes. The participants articulated how engaging the community allows for identifying priority projects and resource allocation, demonstrating a collective decision-making approach. This aligns with the principles of participatory democracy, where citizens directly influence governance and service delivery.

4.3.2 Question 2: What is your perception of the current level of community engagement within Thulamela Local Municipality?

The second interview question explored participants' perceptions of the current state of community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality. The participants provided diverse insights, highlighting variations in engagement levels across different wards and communities.

Participant A

"Although community engagement is being attempted, it is currently uneven and needs to be improved. While there is active engagement in some places, others encounter obstacles, including low awareness and problems with accessibility."

Participant B

Participant B stated, "Even if there has been progress, more can be done. Due to communication and logistical obstacles, community engagement initiatives are frequently dispersed unevenly, making specific communities feel left out."

Participant C

Participant C mentioned, "The level of consistency and depth of involvement might be enhanced. Although the Thulamela Local Municipality has several platforms, it is frequently difficult to contact a wide range of the community, especially underrepresented groups."

Participant D

"At the moment, community involvement varies; although specific projects have had high engagement, a sizable section of the community still feels excluded from decision-making procedures."

Participant E

"Although there is some active engagement in certain places, the level of engagement is currently moderate and inconsistent throughout all wards. Logistical difficulties and insufficient communication resources frequently bring this on."

Participant F

"Although community engagement initiatives are underway, they might be strengthened. Many residents' engagement in decision-making processes is limited because they are not entirely aware of the opportunities for involvement."

Participant G

Participant G stated, "Although measures are in place, community engagement is minimal; outreach and participation, particularly among underrepresented groups, may be improved."

Participant H

"Although it is currently moderate, there is room for development, especially in incorporating rural communities and traditional structures into decision-making processes."

Participant I

"Although mild, the level of engagement needs to be raised. Even while there are community forums and gatherings, few people show up, and certain groups, like young people and those from underprivileged communities, are underrepresented."

Participant J

"Many citizens are unaware of the chances of participating in decision-making processes, and the existing degree of engagement feels constrained."

The participants stated that the current level of community engagement in the Thulamela Local Municipality is modest but inconsistent. Several sub-themes arose, highlighting the problems and diversity in engagement practices. Participants A, B, and E stated that engagement is unequal, with some locations seeing active engagement while others have logistical and accessibility issues. Participant E especially mentioned how poor communication resources contribute to these inconsistencies. Participants C, F, and G stated that underrepresented groups, such as rural communities and youth, frequently feel alienated from decision-making. Participant G stressed the importance of improving outreach efforts to guarantee more diverse representation.

Participants D, H, and I stated that while specific projects see significant levels of engagement, overall engagement remains low. Participant H proposed engaging rural communities and traditional structures in engagement attempts to address this gap. Participants J and F emphasized that many locals are uninformed of opportunities for involvement, with Participant J characterizing the current engagement level as restricted and missing appropriate awareness activities. The responses from the participants indicate that while Thulamela Local Municipality has attempted to promote community engagement, considerable improvements are required. To achieve more fair and practical engagement, it will be necessary to address logistical barriers, raise knowledge of engagement options, and prioritize the inclusion of underrepresented

groups. The findings support the Participatory Democracy Theory. This theory advocates for the active involvement of citizens in decision-making processes and emphasizes the importance of inclusivity and accessibility. The feedback from participants highlights significant disparities in community engagement levels in the Thulamela Local Municipality, especially among underrepresented groups such as rural communities and youth. The call for improved outreach and the need to address logistical barriers demonstrates a desire for more equitable engagement, which aligns with the principles of participatory democracy.

4.3.3 Question 3: What challenges hinder effective community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality?

The third interview question sought to identify the challenges hindering effective community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality. The participants provided diverse insights, highlighting various obstacles impacting the Thulamela Local Municipality's engagement efforts.

Participant A

"Low digital literacy in some places, a lack of trust between the community and government, a lack of communication channels, and a lack of resources are some of the main issues. Disparities in language and culture also present obstacles to inclusive engagement."

Participant B

"The key obstacles are inadequate communication infrastructure, ignorance of involvement options, and limited ability to follow up on community comments. Furthermore, effective engagement is hampered by mistrust between communities and the government."

Participant C

"Significant obstacles include low engagement rates, restricted communication means, and budgetary restrictions. Community members' inadequate comprehension of municipal finance procedures often hampers effective collaboration."

Participant D

"Limited information availability, ignorance of engagement opportunities, and obstacles like language difficulties and digital divides that keep some community members from participating are some of the main issues."

Participant E

"Limited staff capability, little financing for outreach initiatives, and people's lack of knowledge about accessible platforms for interaction are among the difficulties. Infrastructure disparities between urban and rural areas can make the task more difficult."

Participant F

"Some main obstacles are residents' ignorance of engagement options, restricted access to digital platforms, and a lack of funding for outreach programs."

Participant G

"Restricted access to digital platforms, ignorance of involvement opportunities, and a lack of funding for outreach initiatives are significant obstacles."

Participant H

"A lack of resources to hold meetings in remote regions, a lack of communication between traditional leaders and municipal authorities, and mistrust brought on by past inefficiencies in service delivery are among the difficulties."

Participant I

"Lack of trust between citizens and government, inadequate communication tactics, a lack of outreach resources, and logistical hurdles in accessing rural places are some of the main obstacles. Furthermore, there is frequently a discrepancy between what the community expects and what the Thulamela Local Municipality can provide."

Participant J

"Lack of knowledge of engagement programs, poor communication from local government, and socioeconomic obstacles that prohibit engagement are some of the main obstacles."

The participants pointed out obstacles to effective community engagement in the Thulamela Local Municipality. Their comments indicated several sub-themes, including communication barriers, digital and technology limits, socioeconomic and logistical challenges, trust deficits, linguistic and cultural disparities, and knowledge gaps. Participants A, B, and D indicated that inadequate communication infrastructure and a lack of understanding about engagement opportunities are significant barriers. Participant B pointed out that the Thulamela Local Municipality's failure to follow up on community comments undermines engagement initiatives. At the same time, Participant D identified limited access to information as a barrier to engagement. Participants A, F, and G emphasized that restricted access to digital platforms and low digital literacy are significant problems, particularly in rural areas. Participant E stated that disparities in infrastructure between urban and rural areas increase these challenges, making it impossible to engage all community members equally.

Participants E, H, and I indicated socioeconomic and logistical difficulties as barriers to accessing remote places. Participant H observed a lack of funding to arrange engagement events in underprivileged areas. A lack of trust between the Thulamela Local Municipality and its citizens became a recurring problem. Participants A, B, and I relate this to previous inefficiencies and poor communication. Participant H emphasized that miscommunication between municipal authorities and traditional leaders complicates the issue, reducing community trust in municipal operations. Language and cultural differences were also identified as challenges to engagement, with Participants A and D emphasizing how these distinctions restrict inclusivity in diverse communities.

Participants C, E, and F stressed the importance of community members having a thorough understanding of municipal finance and governance to collaborate effectively. According to Participant C, low engagement rates are partly due to a lack of knowledge. The key barriers to effective community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality are systemic and diverse, encompassing infrastructural, logistical, and relational issues. Addressing these difficulties requires upgrading communication

infrastructure, bridging the digital divide, establishing trust, and increasing community members' knowledge and skills. These actions will contribute to a more inclusive and effective engagement framework. The findings support Social Capital Theory. This theory posits that social networks and the relationships within them play a critical role in facilitating cooperation and engagement among community members. The obstacles identified in the Thulamela Local Municipality highlight trust deficits and communication barriers, central components of social capital.

4.3.4 Question 4: How do you think digital platforms (e.g., social media, online portals) could improve community engagement?

The fourth interview question aimed to explore participants' perspectives on the potential of digital platforms, such as social media and online portals, in enhancing community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality. Participants shared various insights, emphasizing the role of these platforms in improving communication, accessibility, and inclusivity.

Participant A

"Digital platforms can facilitate real-time feedback, increase accessibility, and offer a welcoming environment for discussion. Social media, for example, facilitates broad communication and encourages transparency, especially regarding youth involvement."

Participant B

"A quick and affordable method of reaching a large audience, particularly young ones, is through digital media. Real-time updates, two-way contact, and the ability to collect input via questionnaires, polls, and public consultations are all made possible by them."

Participant C

"Digital platforms can provide transparency in financial reporting and expedite communication. Community members may monitor spending and offer input using interactive financial dashboards and online budget trackers."

Participant D

"By offering timely information, promoting dialogue, and enabling more involvement through online forums and polls, digital platforms can improve engagement. Additionally, they allow us to contact younger audiences successfully."

Participant E

"Real-time, affordable communication and feedback gathering are made possible by digital platforms. While internet portals enable residents to monitor progress and directly submit issues, social media can increase engagement among younger inhabitants."

Participant F

"Because digital platforms offer easily accessible means for feedback and discussion, they can significantly improve community engagement. They facilitate real-time communication and rapidly disseminate information to a larger audience."

Participant G

"By offering real-time updates, generating feedback via questionnaires, and establishing discussion forums, digital platforms can improve communication and facilitate citizens' interaction with municipal services."

Participant H

"Youth and urban areas can benefit from digital platforms, but rural populations frequently need access to these resources. Conventional techniques like neighbourhood gatherings and local radio should supplement digital tactics."

Participant I

"Digital platforms can help close the distance between the community and its citizens by facilitating direct communication and prompt information. They can also make it possible to gather input, raise awareness of local projects, and interact with younger, tech-savvy populations."

Participant J

"By making information easily accessible and enabling residents to express their thoughts via online questionnaires and social media interactions, digital platforms can improve engagement."

The participants discussed ways digital platforms could enhance community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality. Their responses highlighted multiple sub-themes, highlighting the platforms' potential to improve communication, transparency, and diversity while solving engagement difficulties. Participants A, B, and G noted that digital platforms provide real-time contact and feedback. Participant B underlined that social media and internet questionnaires provide two-way communication and successful public discussions. At the same time, Participant G mentioned that discussion forums can foster meaningful conversations between the Thulamela Local Municipality and its inhabitants.

When interviewed, Participants C and E acknowledged the role of digital platforms in promoting accountability and transparency. According to Participant C, financial dashboards and online budget trackers allow residents to monitor municipal expenditures and suggest budgetary priorities. Participant E also noted how online portals may give the public access to project development. Participants B, D, and I stressed the accessibility and inclusion of digital platforms, particularly among younger and more technologically proficient populations. Participant D highlighted that these platforms provide rapid updates and allow for greater engagement, particularly among urban groups. However, Participant H highlighted worries about the digital divide in rural areas, recommending that traditional methods such as local radio and neighbourhood gatherings complement digital efforts to promote inclusivity. Participants B and E emphasized that digital platforms are inexpensive and practical for engaging huge audiences. Participant B mentioned that social media provides an affordable approach to spreading information and obtaining community feedback.

Participants A, D, and I addressed the role of digital platforms in engaging young people. Participant, I mentioned that these platforms could assist in boosting awareness of local programs and provide possibilities for contact with young people who are comfortable using Internet technologies. According to the information shown above, digital platforms have the potential to dramatically improve community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality by enabling real-time communication,

enhancing transparency, and reaching a larger audience. However, issues such as inadequate access to digital infrastructure in rural areas must be addressed to ensure inclusivity. Integrating digital technologies with conventional engagement approaches is advised for a more thorough and practical approach to community engagement. The findings from the text support Participatory Democracy Theory. This theory emphasizes active citizen engagement in decision-making processes, focusing on inclusion and engagement. The participants' discussions about how digital platforms can facilitate real-time communication, enhance transparency, and reach broader audiences align well with the principles of participatory democracy.

4.3.5 Question 5: What strategies or initiatives currently encourage community involvement in decision-making?

This interview's question is focused on identifying the strategies or initiatives that the Thulamela Local Municipality has implemented to encourage community engagement in decision-making processes. The participants shared diverse insights into the current approaches used to foster community involvement.

Participant A

"Community forums, Integrated Development Plan (IDP) meetings, and collaborations with traditional leaders are examples of current tactics. Additionally, ward council members are essential in advocating for local issues at the local level."

Participant B

"We have venues like stakeholder engagement meetings, public involvement forums, and IDP consultations. Our collaborations with traditional leaders and ward council members are also crucial in elevating the voices of the community."

Participant C

"IDP seminars, the release of yearly financial reports for public inspection, and community consultation during budget planning are some strategies. Community-based organizations are also involved in representing local demands."

Participant D

"To encourage civic engagement, we have started holding frequent town hall meetings, running social media campaigns to gather opinions on municipal initiatives, and forming alliances with neighbourhood organizations."

Participant E

"Currently, we engage with ward council members to plan workshops, community meetings, and consultations for the Integrated Development Plan (IDP). Additionally, collaborations with traditional leaders guarantee that the engagement process includes all cultures."

Participant F

"Public forums, workshops, and questionnaires are examples of current efforts to get locals' opinions on various projects and policies. However, we must raise awareness and encourage more people to participate in these programs."

Participant G

"Initiatives include stakeholder seminars, public gatherings, and online questionnaires to gather community opinions on regional policies and initiatives."

Participant H

"Using traditional leaders to advise on culturally sensitive projects and public consultation during Integrated Development Plan (IDP) sessions are two examples of strategies. However, these efforts frequently lack coherence."

Participant I

"Integrated Development Plan (IDP) consultations, ward meetings, and community forums are held regularly to promote involvement. Working together with traditional leaders also facilitates community mobilization for specific projects."

Participant J

"Although there are programs like community forums, open forums, and local newsletters, they could be pushed more successfully."

Participants discussed many strategies and efforts Thulamela Local Municipality is undertaking to increase community engagement in decision-making processes. The replies indicated various sub-themes on the means of engagement. Participants A, B, and I emphasized the relevance of Integrated Development Plan (IDP) sessions for community engagement. Participant C noted that IDP seminars and the public release of financial reports increase openness and allow residents to provide feedback during budget planning processes. Participants B, D, and F emphasized the importance of stakeholder engagement meetings, public forums, and workshops in getting community feedback on municipal initiatives and policies. Participant G claimed that online questionnaires are also used to gather input from residents.

Participants A, E, and I repeatedly discussed the role of traditional leaders. They noted that traditional leaders enable culturally sensitive engagement and advocate for community concerns in municipal talks. Participant H stressed the importance of greater coherence in optimizing their impact. Participants D and J mentioned that communication tactics, including newsletters, town hall meetings, and social media campaigns, convey information and gather feedback. However, Participant J suggested that these initiatives could be implemented more successfully to reach a larger audience. According to the responses, Thulamela Local Municipality has developed many measures to enhance community involvement, including IDP consultations, public forums, and cooperation with traditional leaders. However, the effectiveness of these activities might be improved by greater coordination, increased awareness campaigns, and the use of digital resources to reach underrepresented populations. The participatory theory emphasizes the importance of active citizen participation in decision-making processes, which aligns with Thulamela Local Municipality's various strategies to engage the community, such as Integrated Development Plan (IDP) sessions, public forums, workshops, and stakeholder meetings. These efforts demonstrate a commitment to ensuring residents have a voice and can actively contribute to municipal initiatives and policies. In addition, the involvement of traditional leaders in facilitating culturally sensitive engagement reflects the core principles of participatory democracy, where all community members, particularly marginalized voices, are encouraged to participate in governance. The discussions about collecting feedback through various channels, including online

questionnaires and public events, highlight the municipality's efforts to enhance democratic engagement.

4.3.6 Question 6: What additional steps can be taken to strengthen the relationship between the Thulamela Local Municipality and community members?

The sixth question explored participants' views on what additional steps could be implemented to strengthen the relationship between Thulamela Local Municipality and its community members. The participants provided various suggestions, focusing on improving communication, fostering trust, and ensuring inclusivity in municipal processes.

Participant A

"The Thulamela Local Municipality must enhance its communication strategies by regularly updating projects and initiatives. Transparency should be prioritized to build trust with the community, and community forums should be expanded to include underrepresented groups."

Participant B

"Introducing mobile engagement units to reach rural areas and increasing the frequency of community meetings would help bridge the gap. Additionally, creating a feedback mechanism to ensure that community input is acted upon is essential."

Participant C

"Providing training programs for community representatives, including traditional leaders and ward councillors, could improve the understanding of municipal processes. Also, having a dedicated office for community engagement would enhance accessibility."

Participant D

"Partnerships with community-based organizations could strengthen outreach efforts. The Thulamela Local Municipality should also actively involve local leaders to build a sense of shared responsibility and collaboration."

Participant E

"Introducing multilingual communication tools and culturally sensitive engagement strategies is necessary to include all community members, especially those in rural and marginalized areas. Regular reporting on municipal decisions would also improve transparency."

Participant F

"The Thulamela Local Municipality needs to allocate more resources to community engagement activities. Establishing digital engagement platforms, like mobile apps for feedback and updates, could make the process more efficient and inclusive."

Participant G

Workshops on governance and service delivery could enable the community to engage more successfully. Maintaining a closer relationship could also be facilitated by routine check-ins with community representatives.

Participant H

"Improving trust requires addressing past inefficiencies and showing accountability. The Thulamela Local Municipality should establish a complaints office where residents can report issues and receive timely resolutions."

Participant I

"Encouraging youth involvement through social media campaigns and projects tailored to their interests could help bridge generational gaps. The Thulamela Local Municipality should also provide incentives for active community engagement."

Participant J

"Focusing on consistency in communication and ensuring that all projects are inclusive and transparent would go a long way in strengthening relationships. Providing periodic updates on the progress of community-initiated projects is also vital."

The participants made various recommendations to improve the interaction between Thulamela Local Municipality and its community members. Their comments indicated

various sub-themes, emphasizing communication enhancement, inclusivity, empowerment, and trust-building. Participants A, B, and J focused on improving communication skills. Participant A suggested providing regular updates on municipal projects to increase transparency, whereas Participant B suggested implementing feedback systems to guarantee that community opinion is acted on. Participant J stated that consistent communication and project updates are critical for establishing trust. Participants E and F stressed the importance of inclusivity in engagement activities. Participant E emphasized the need for multilingual communication tools and culturally sensitive tactics to incorporate excluded populations. Participant F proposed using mobile engagement platforms and boosting resources to make the process more accessible.

Participants C, G, and I discussed the relevance of community empowerment. Participant C recommended training programs for traditional leaders and ward councillors to help them understand municipal processes. Participant G proposed holding governance and service delivery workshops, whereas Participant I argued for youth-focused programs and social media campaigns to bridge generation gaps. Participants C and H stressed the importance of committed resources and institutions to promote engagement. Participant C suggested building a specialized office for community engagement, whereas Participant H offered to establish a complaints resolution office to handle residents' problems as soon as possible. Participants D and H emphasized the value of trust-building through accountability. Participant D proposed building ties with community-based organizations, while Participant H emphasized the need to overcome previous inefficiencies and provide timely resolutions to community issues.

The comments indicate that building the relationship between Thulamela Local Municipality and its community members necessitates a comprehensive approach. Key strategies include increasing communication, guaranteeing diversity, empowering community members, and establishing trust through accountability and devoted resources. If successfully implemented, these activities have the potential to foster a more collaborative and long-term connection between the Thulamela Local Municipality and its residents. These findings support the Participatory Democracy Theory. This theory emphasizes the active involvement of community members in the

decision-making processes of governance. The participants' recommendations for enhancing communication, inclusivity, and community empowerment align closely with the principles of participatory democracy, which advocates for engaging citizens and ensuring their voices are heard in local governance.

4.3.7 Question 7: What role do transparency and accountability play in community engagement?

The seventh question sought to explore participants' perspectives on the role of transparency and accountability in fostering effective community engagement within Thulamela Local Municipality. Participants shared their insights, emphasizing the importance of openness and responsibility in building trust and ensuring meaningful engagement.

Participant A

"Transparency builds trust between the Thulamela Local Municipality and the community. When information is openly shared, residents feel valued, strengthening their commitment to participating in projects and decision-making processes."

Participant B

"Accountability ensures that promises made by the Thulamela Local Municipality are fulfilled, creating confidence among community members. Transparency allows people to understand how resources are being allocated and used."

Participant C

"Transparency guarantees that community people know project status and money outlays. Holding local authorities accountable for their deeds and choices requires accountability."

Participant D

"Open communication and regular updates foster trust. Transparency and accountability create an environment where community members feel their voices matter and their concerns are addressed."

Participant E

"Transparency ensures that the public has access to municipal plans and budgets. Accountability encourages municipal officials to act in the community's best interests, which builds confidence in local governance."

Participant F

"Transparency is critical because it eliminates suspicion and prevents misinformation. Accountability ensures that community concerns are not ignored but are addressed promptly."

Participant G

"When transparency is present, community members can see the impact of their contributions. Accountability ensures municipal officials follow through on their commitments, encouraging more engagement."

Participant H

"Transparency allows community members to monitor municipal activities and feel included in decision-making. Accountability ensures that resources are used effectively and ethically."

Participant I

"Transparency and accountability are interlinked. Together, they ensure that municipal decisions are open to scrutiny and that officials are answerable to the community for their actions."

Participant J

"Without transparency and accountability, engagement efforts become superficial. These principles are the foundation for building trust and fostering genuine collaboration between the Thulamela Local Municipality and the community."

The participants emphasized the need for transparency and accountability in promoting effective community engagement. Several sub-themes emerged, focusing on how these principles foster trust, increase engagement, and improve municipal

governance. Participants A, B, and D noted how transparency fosters confidence between the Thulamela Local Municipality and its residents. Participant A stated that freely sharing information makes residents feel appreciated, whereas Participant D remarked that regular updates and open communication build a sense of inclusion. Participants B, C, and H highlighted the importance of transparency in keeping community people informed about project progress and financial expenditures. Participant H stressed transparency, which enables residents to follow municipal actions and feel involved in governance.

Participants E, F, and I emphasized the significance of accountability in ensuring that municipal authorities behave appropriately. Participant F stated that accountability keeps community concerns from being neglected, but Participant I emphasized that it ensures decisions are available for inspection. Participants G and J associated transparency and accountability with increased involvement. Participant G remarked that these principles demonstrate the influence of community contributions, whilst Participant J asserted that they are essential for creating trust and true collaboration. The results indicate that transparency and accountability are critical to effective community engagement. They promote trust and inclusivity and hold local authorities accountable for their activities. Strengthening these concepts within Thulamela Local Municipality will result in more meaningful and sustainable community engagement. The findings support Social Capital Theory and Participatory Democracy Theory. The Social Capital Theory emphasizes the value of social networks, trust, and norms in fostering cooperation among individuals and groups. The findings highlight how transparency encourages trust between the Thulamela Local Municipality and its residents, aligning with social capital concepts. Participants noted that sharing information and engaging in open communication enhances the sense of community and belonging, key components of social capital. At the same time, Participatory Democracy Theory advocates for inclusive engagement and engagement of citizens in decision-making processes. The findings indicate that transparency and accountability increase community involvement and empowerment. Participants emphasized that transparency enables residents to follow municipal actions and feel involved in governance, which echoes the principles of participatory democracy, where citizen engagement is crucial for a healthy democratic process.

4.3.8 Question 8: Are there any other recommendations you would like to make for enhancing community engagement in the Thulamela Local Municipality?

The eighth question sought additional participant recommendations on enhancing community engagement within Thulamela Local Municipality. Participants suggested improving engagement strategies, fostering trust, and ensuring inclusivity.

Participant A

"The Thulamela Local Municipality should focus on capacity-building initiatives for community leaders to ensure they are well-equipped to advocate for their constituents. More workshops and training sessions on municipal processes and governance should be organized."

Participant B

"Establishing local advisory committees that include representatives from diverse community groups would ensure inclusivity. These committees can provide a platform for residents to voice their concerns directly to municipal officials."

Participant C

"The Thulamela Local Municipality should prioritize the development of digital tools, such as mobile apps and interactive portals, to provide real-time updates and collect feedback. These tools could make engagement easier and more accessible."

Participant D

"Introducing an independent oversight body to monitor municipal activities and ensure accountability would build trust. Regular public audits and open forums could also increase transparency."

Participant E

"Greater investment in infrastructure for rural areas is necessary to ensure equitable access to engagement opportunities. This includes expanding internet access and providing transportation for residents to attend meetings."

Participant F

"The Thulamela Local Municipality should create a formalized feedback loop where community input is collected and visibly acted upon. This will show residents that their contributions matter."

Participant G

"Incorporating traditional leaders into decision-making processes in a more structured way could improve community buy-in for municipal projects. Traditional leaders can act as intermediaries to bridge communication gaps."

Participant H

"The Thulamela Local Municipality should conduct regular questionnaires to understand community needs and priorities better. These questionnaires can help ensure that engagement strategies align with residents' expectations."

Participant I

"Launching awareness campaigns to educate residents about existing engagement platforms and opportunities would increase engagement. Social media and local radio stations can effectively support such campaigns."

Participant J

"Partnering with community-based organizations and NGOs could help the Thulamela Local Municipality reach underrepresented groups. These partnerships can strengthen outreach and foster greater inclusivity in engagement efforts."

The participants made numerous recommendations to improve community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality. Key sub-themes arose, emphasizing capacity building, inclusivity, transparency, and infrastructure development. Participants A, F, and H stressed the value of capacity-building activities. Participant A proposed organizing workshops and training for community leaders, whereas Participant H emphasized the importance of conducting regular questionnaires to understand community needs better. Participants B, E, and G discussed strategies for promoting inclusion. Participant B suggested forming local advisory groups, whereas Participant E emphasized the need for more investment in rural infrastructure to

provide fair access. Participant G recommended formalizing the involvement of traditional leaders in decision-making processes.

Participants C, D, and F emphasized the significance of transparency and accountability. Participant C proposed creating digital tools to promote communication, whereas Participant D suggested establishing an independent oversight agency to monitor municipal activity. Participant F called for a formal feedback loop to show that community involvement is important. Participants I and J focused on outreach and awareness initiatives. Participant I proposed leveraging social media and local radio to inform citizens about involvement opportunities, whereas Participant J highlighted collaborating with community-based organizations to reach marginalized populations. According to the comments, strengthening community engagement requires a comprehensive approach that includes capacity building, fostering diversity, improving transparency, and resolving infrastructure disparities. Implementing these recommendations can create a more collaborative and practical relationship between the Thulamela Local Municipality and its residents. The findings from the participant's recommendations support Participatory Democracy Theory. This theory emphasizes the importance of citizens' active engagement in governance processes and policy-making. The discussions highlighted initiatives focused on community engagement, such as capacity-building workshops for leaders, forming local advisory groups, and increased outreach through social media and local radio. These suggestions aim to enhance citizen involvement and ensure that diverse voices are heard in decision-making, which aligns well with the principles of Participatory Democracy.

4.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented interpreted and analyzed data collected through questionnaires to understand better the nature of community engagement in the Thulamela Local Municipality. Data collection using qualitative methods, such as interviews with municipal officials, traditional leaders, and community representatives, was done to investigate the roles, problems, and potential improvements to community engagement. This chapter was divided into two sections: the first section presented, interpreted, and analyzed data obtained through questionnaires, while the second section presented, interpreted, and analyzed data collected through interviews.

Responses were presented, interpreted, and synthesized narratively to grasp community engagement strategies fully. The sessions addressed critical themes, including the role of community engagement in service delivery, the current state of engagement, barriers to effective engagement, and strategies for achieving them.

The findings revealed that the engagement process could be improved internally due to poor communication, a lack of access to digital platforms, and distrust; externally, there was a lack of stakeholder collaboration and resident engagement in engagements. However, it also demonstrated the power of digital platforms, openness, and inclusive strategies that enable genuine, meaningful engagement. This revelation should inspire hope for the future of community engagement. Participants suggested increasing capacity, improving infrastructure, and aligning conversations at the municipal level with more local communities. The following chapter will evaluate the findings, draw conclusions, and make concrete recommendations to improve community involvement in the Thulamela Local Municipality. It will also offer areas for further research based on the insights collected in this study. The next chapter presents findings, recommendations, and conclusions.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The conclusions of this study were significant in outlining the main findings and recommendations for improving community engagement in local governance. The focus remained on bridging the gaps between municipal authorities and community members to increase local government transparency, accountability, and inclusivity.

5.2 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

This study sought to answer crucial concerns about community engagement and participatory governance, which are critical. It identified practical solutions for improving municipal service delivery and strengthening community-local government partnerships. The researcher researched literature on community engagement and participatory government frameworks, which helped to provide the theoretical basis for the research study. The researcher used a mixed-methods strategy, merging quantitative and qualitative techniques to allow an in-depth understanding of the subject matter. Non-probability purposive sampling methods were used to draw the participants, which included municipal officials, community members, ward councillors, and many other stakeholders. Information was collected using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The audience should feel the significance of these objectives as they underline the importance and relevance of the research.

Data analysis was done using statistical techniques for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative insights. Graphical tables and narrative summaries were used to present the results, examining respondents' perceptions and experiences.

The specific objectives of the study were:

- To assess the current state of community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality.
- To identify key factors influencing community engagement in municipal service delivery.

- To evaluate the potential of digital technologies in enhancing community engagement.
- To recommend strategies for improving community engagement in local governance.

5.3 FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study's findings are presented in this section, emphasizing specific objectives for improving community engagement in the Thulamela Local Municipality. These objectives served as a guidepost for achieving the study's primary goal. The researcher aimed to assess the current status of community engagement, identify key factors that influence such engagement, determine the viability of digital technologies, and recommend strategies to improve participatory governance in municipal services. The study's findings are consistent with these objectives, providing a thorough understanding of the community engagement dynamics in the Thulamela Local Municipality. The study also found practical challenges and opportunities for increasing resident involvement in decision-making, which is critical for implementing the recommendations.

The researcher discussed the emerging themes from the interview schedule and questionnaire data, including the significance of digital inclusion, socioeconomic disparities, and the efficacy of current public engagement tactics that promote accountability, transparency, and community-local government collaboration. These results offer valuable perspectives that result in practical suggestions to improve service delivery by bolstering community involvement.

5.3.1 Findings on the current state of Community Engagement

The researcher's main goal was to determine the current status of community engagement in the Thulamela Local Municipality. It was discovered that a significant portion of respondents, 75 respondents (68.2%), strongly agreed that community involvement in decision-making improves the effectiveness and relevance of municipal services. This shows that although the value of engagement is acknowledged, it has to be implemented more consistently.

Additionally, the study revealed that a relatively high percentage of respondents, 26.3%, disagreed with the notion that the local government routinely updates the public about engagement programs. In comparison, only 44.6% of respondents agreed. This result demonstrates a communication gap and a need for more frequent and transparent information from the local administration. This showed a limited correlation with the percentage of respondents who stated that there was a strong relationship between the Thulamela Local Municipality and the community (35.5% versus 40%); on the other hand, a lack of trust led to the failure of the co-governance approach. The "community actively participated in planning and delivery," according to 37.3% of respondents. Physical and practical obstacles to communication and inclusion exist, such as shallow engagement practices, lack of proactive outreach efforts, and logistical access impediments. Similarly, just 45.5% of respondents agreed, with 34.5% disagreeing, that the Thulamela Local Municipality successfully uses community feedback. This implies that community efforts must have observable results, which can deter future involvement. Respondents to interviews assessing the state of community engagement pointed out that while there are initiatives to involve communities, more communication and a feeling of exclusivity in decision-making processes are frequently required. Respondents often pointed out that, under current practice, community involvement typically consists of consultative engagement rather than collaborative engagement, reducing their opinion's perceived value.

There is a pressing need for more customized and contextually appropriate engagement programs, as the research has revealed that although there is an appreciation for the potential benefits of community engagement, much work needs to be done in communication, inclusivity, and translating feedback into actionable outcomes. The audience should feel the urgency of this need, emphasizing the importance of addressing this issue. It also revealed that current engagement practices must respond more effectively to the community's diverse needs, with only 42.8% of respondents believing that current strategies meet community needs.

5.3.2 Findings on the Factors Influencing Community Engagement

The study's second goal was to identify the most important factors influencing community engagement in the Thulamela Local Municipality. According to the data collected, 59 respondents (53.6%) strongly agreed that socioeconomic differences

significantly impact community engagement. It can be interpreted from the result that addressing economic disparities is a must for better inclusion in municipal decision-making processes. The study also found that the majority of respondents, 68 respondents (61.8%), strongly agreed that transparency and accountability influence the community's decision to trust and engage with the Thulamela Local municipality. Thus, this encourages the Thulamela Local Municipality to develop its accountability procedures to foster positive ties with the community. The study also found that 57 (51.8%) respondents agreed that technological factors, such as the digital divide, influence community engagement. The result indicates that unequal access to digital resources and platforms is a significant barrier to effective engagement, particularly among those who live in rural areas or have low levels of technology adoption.

Participants in the interviews emphasized that communication gaps between the Thulamela Local Municipality and the community hurt engagement. They also mentioned the need for regular updates on municipal initiatives and more opportunities to participate in planning and decision-making processes. Cultural and linguistic diversity within the Thulamela Local Municipality presents both an opportunity and a challenge for engagement. The study also found that trust in local government is a key predictor of community desire to engage. Respondents responded that perceived mismanagement or failure to deliver on commitments undermines trust and discourages involvement. The findings revealed that socioeconomic disparities, transparency, availability of technology, effective communication, cultural characteristics, and trust in leadership are all important factors impacting community engagement in the Thulamela Local Municipality. These elements must be addressed to establish a more participatory and inclusive governing structure.

5.3.3 Findings on the Potential of Digital Tools

The study's third objective was to determine the effectiveness of digital tools in increasing community engagement. According to the study results, 48 respondents (43.6%) strongly agreed, while 52 (47.3%) agreed that social media sites can help increase communication between the Thulamela Local Municipality and the local community. This demonstrates the acceptance of digital tools as a realistic means of broadcasting real-time information and gathering feedback.

The study also found that 44 respondents (40%) strongly agreed, while 51 respondents (46.4%) agreed that Internet portals can increase access to municipal services. This demonstrates that Internet platforms can simplify service delivery and decrease administrative hurdles for citizens. Furthermore, a substantial proportion of respondents, 42 (38.2%), strongly agreed, and 55 (50%) agreed that digital tools improve transparency by providing residents with real-time information, resulting in improved accountability in municipal procedures. According to the study, 39 respondents (35.5%) strongly agreed, while 57 respondents (51.8%) believed that digital platforms improve diversity by addressing accessibility difficulties plaguing some excluded groups. Furthermore, 41 respondents (37.3%) strongly agreed, while 56 respondents (50.9%) agreed that digital engagement tools can assist in removing logistical hurdles such as travel costs and time constraints, hence encouraging broader community engagement.

The researcher discovered throughout the interviews that the Thulamela Local Municipality has begun to use social media and mobile apps to distribute information about municipal projects, timetables, and emergency notifications. It was also shown that, while these platforms have substantially increased communication and interaction, particular residents face digital literacy issues, limited internet connection, and outdated technological infrastructure. The study also found that digital tools like interactive web platforms and mobile applications can significantly boost community engagement and openness. These tools make it easier for citizens to submit grievances, track municipal actions, and engage in public consultations more effectively. Finally, the study concluded that digital tools could improve traditional engagement approaches, resulting in a more participative and responsive governing structure.

5.3.4 Findings on Strategies to Enhance Community Engagement

The fourth objective examined strategies to strengthen community engagement in the Thulamela Local Municipality, emphasizing strengthening governance, service delivery, and participatory approaches. According to the data obtained, 75 respondents (68.2%) strongly agreed that community involvement in decision-making improves municipal service delivery, while 32 (29.1%) agreed. This statement clearly

states that participatory decision-making is essential for effective community engagement.

It also found that 56 participants (50.9%) strongly agreed, while 49 participants (44.5%) felt that community involvement develops a sense of ownership among people. This suggests that as involvement grows, accountability increases, promoting a shared understanding of duty for community development. Furthermore, 68 respondents (61.8%) strongly agreed that community engagement promotes openness and accountability, highlighting its critical role in building confidence between the Thulamela Local Municipality and its citizens. The researcher's interviews indicated the importance of good communication channels in successfully executing engagement initiatives. The findings revealed that digital platforms, such as social media and online portals, have enormous potential to promote inclusivity and accessibility, as seen by 90.9% of respondents agreeing that social media facilitates more excellent communication with the community. Similarly, 87.3% of respondents believed digital platforms promote inclusivity by removing logistical barriers to engagement.

The research also identified hurdles to implementing engagement initiatives, including increased infrastructure, the digital gap, and socioeconomic inequities. However, the study suggested that these obstacles can be overcome by targeted engagement techniques, such as incorporating cultural assets and community-led projects. The study concluded that measures for increasing community engagement should prioritize participatory decision-making, digital platforms, and effective communication. Furthermore, successful implementation of these tactics necessitates a consideration of their suitability within the local socioeconomic and cultural environment. Finally, the findings underscored the importance of ongoing review and feedback channels to ensure engagement tactics align with community needs.

5.4 SYNTHESIS OF THE STUDY

This section outlines the research on strategies enhancing community engagement in municipal services in Thulamela Local Municipality. Based on the data analyzed from questionnaires and interviews, the following synthesis summarizes the important findings of the study:

- The study's synthesis underscores key insights: Community engagement catalyzes accountability, transparency, and trust in municipal-resident relations, ensuring effective governance.
- Involving the community in municipal decision-making ensures that services address the genuine needs and priorities of the residents.
- Effective community engagement reduces the gap between municipal authorities and residents by promoting collaboration and inclusivity.
- Digital technologies, such as social media and online portals, enhance communication between the municipality and the community, overcoming logistical barriers and increasing accessibility.
- Involving residents in decision-making empowers communities by providing a platform to influence policy and resource allocation, resulting in more equitable and efficient service delivery.
- Socioeconomic disparities and digital exclusion are significant barriers to inclusive community engagement, requiring targeted interventions.
- Community engagement improves the efficient utilization of resources by leveraging local knowledge and promoting a sense of ownership among residents.
- Collaboration between the municipality, ward councillors, traditional leaders, and community-based organizations strengthens community engagement and enhances the delivery of municipal services.
- The municipality has established policies and mechanisms to promote engagement, but their implementation and visibility need improvement to address gaps in communication and engagement.
- Municipal officials and ward councillors are key intermediaries in facilitating community engagement; additional training is necessary to enhance their effectiveness.
- Community members value openness, transparency, and frequent updates from the municipality, which builds trust and fosters stronger municipal-community relationships.
- Inclusivity and diversity are essential considerations for community engagement strategies to address the varied needs of different demographic groups.

- Strengthening community engagement can foster social cohesion and create a more participatory and resilient local governance framework.

From the data collected through interviews, the following additional insights emerged:

- Community engagement is critical for aligning municipal service delivery with the diverse and evolving needs of the community.
- Despite efforts to engage communities, some residents remain dissatisfied due to inconsistent outreach and a lack of visible results from engagement initiatives.
- Municipal leaders must prioritize the training and empowerment of staff to improve service delivery and interaction with the community.
- While there are examples of successful collaboration between the municipality and community stakeholders, such as traditional leaders and civic organizations, these partnerships require consistent support and resources to maximize their impact.
- Addressing systemic challenges such as financial constraints, bureaucratic inertia, and digital inequities, which refer to unequal access to digital tools and resources, is vital for fostering more effective community engagement practices.

5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

This section gives the study's recommendations based on key findings on strategies to enhance community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality. The recommendations address the importance of involvement in governance, integrating digital tools, eliminating barriers to engagement, and cultivating relationships between the Thulamela Local Municipality and its inhabitants to improve governance, accountability, and service delivery.

5.5.1 Recommendation on Enhancing Community Engagement in Local Governance

The study recommends that Thulamela Local Municipality actively integrate communities into local governance procedures to enhance engagement and improve service delivery outcomes. This implies that communities are given numerous

opportunities to engage in municipal governance decision-making processes. The researcher recommends community engagement to enable residents to meaningfully contribute to a sense of ownership and accountability in local governance, resulting in a more successful and harmonious community.

Thulamela Local Municipality should create the appropriate platforms and methods to ensure transparency and inclusion in its governance processes. Community involvement in governance promotes self-reliance and ensures that decisions align with the community's needs and priorities. Community engagement efforts should increase citizens' confidence and awareness, allowing them to understand better and influence local governing processes. The study emphasizes the significance of an open and honest interaction between the Thulamela Local Municipality and its stakeholders. The Thulamela Local Municipality must use all available channels to solicit feedback from locals, including community forums, ward meetings, and digital engagement tools. These programs will address important governance and service delivery concerns, investigating new solutions to satisfy the community's expectations.

The researcher proposes that the local government enlighten its community members about their roles, rights, and responsibilities within the governance structure. Workshops and sensitization initiatives help them understand municipal functions and encourage informed involvement. Furthermore, the study's findings indicate that community engagement is integrated into all aspects of municipal government. This includes collaborative planning and oversight of municipal programs to ensure that resources are used effectively and efficiently to meet people's needs. There is a link between Thulamela Local Municipality and its people; increasing community involvement will help create trust and enable Thulamela Local Municipality to achieve its aim of sustainable development, and your active engagement is critical in this process.

5.5.2 Recommendation on the Integration of Digital Platforms for Engagement

The study recommends that the Thulamela Local Municipality prioritize using and integrating digital technologies to improve community engagement. The Thulamela Local Municipality's yearly financial plan should include a particular budget for developing and maintaining digital tools that promote effective communication and

engagement. It is advised that these platforms be open to all community members to promote inclusivity and transparency in governance.

Thulamela Local Municipality should create an annual plan for implementing and evaluating digital engagement strategies. This strategy should outline how digital platforms, such as mobile apps, social media, and online portals, can help the Thulamela Local Municipality and its citizens communicate. The researcher recommends that the Thulamela Local Municipality invests in capacity-building activities, such as digital literacy programs, to guarantee that all community members can effectively use these platforms. It is also advised that the Thulamela Local Municipality improves service delivery by incorporating digital platforms into its operational processes. These platforms should allow real-time reporting on service delivery concerns such as water, electricity, sanitation, and road maintenance. The study recommends that the Thulamela Local Municipality use digital tools to streamline administrative operations, minimize response times, and promote accountability.

The study underscores the need to prioritize rural areas when implementing digital engagement initiatives. Efforts should be undertaken to improve internet connectivity and access to digital resources in underserved areas. These activities would promote fair involvement in digital interaction and strengthen ties between the Thulamela Local Municipality and its varied communities. The Thulamela Local Municipality should aim to be a leader in digital engagement for local administration. Regular evaluations of the performance of digital platforms and their effects on community satisfaction should be carried out to ensure continual improvement. Integrating digital tools enables the Thulamela Local Municipality to develop long-term strategies for involving inhabitants in decision-making and service delivery.

5.5.3 Recommendation on Addressing Barriers to Community Engagement

The researcher suggests that the Thulamela Local Municipality uses an integrated approach to overcoming the constraints that prevent effective community engagement. It is suggested that the Thulamela Local Municipality decentralize its community involvement activities so that all inhabitants, particularly those living in rural and underserved areas, can participate. Localized meetings and mobile outreach activities would increase the accessibility of engagement platforms in local areas.

The study recommends that the Thulamela Local Municipality interacts with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to address the resource and capability constraints that limit their engagement initiatives. NGOs can give technical assistance, financing, and training programs to help the Thulamela Local Municipality engage effectively with various community groups. It should also collaborate with Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) to bring engagement to the grassroots and guarantee that all community members' needs are satisfied. The researcher emphasizes the necessity to eliminate logistical and technological barriers to engagement. As a result, it recommended that the Thulamela Local Municipality create digital literacy programs to provide members with the skills they need to participate in online discussions and use municipal digital platforms. Special subsidies for internet connectivity in underserved areas should be prioritized, including translation services for non-native speakers.

The Thulamela Local Municipality should also work with ward committees, traditional leaders, and Community Development Workers (CDWs) to increase engagement. These stakeholders will serve as liaisons, bringing forth community concerns and facilitating two-way contact between the Thulamela Local Municipality and inhabitants. Meetings through Integrated Development Plan (IDP) forums should be scheduled so locals can express their needs and opinions. The researcher advises that the Thulamela Local Municipality form a rapid reaction team to address community complaints and challenges. This program would build confidence and demonstrate the Thulamela Local Municipality's commitment to removing barriers to community involvement. Following these strategies, the Thulamela Local Municipality may create a more inclusive and participatory governance structure that benefits all stakeholders.

5.5.4 Recommendation on Strengthening the Relationship Between the Thulamela Local Municipality and Communities

The study prescribes conscious acts to build its relationship with the communities by entailing trust, transparency, and accountability. The communities must actively engage in all governance and service delivery matters. It would be appreciated if the Thulamela Local Municipality could consult with communities before any policies or projects can be initiated, ensuring resident voices and needs are centrally placed in decision-making. The Thulamela Local Municipality should treat community members

as important stakeholders and customers, attending to their concerns with respect and due time. The researcher emphasizes better communication between the municipal leaders and the community. The Thulamela Local Municipality should establish regular communication channels with the community through public meetings, forums, and online platforms to ensure their concerns are heard and responded to promptly.

To improve interpersonal relationships, the Thulamela Local Municipality must prioritize maintaining and enhancing vital infrastructure, including roadways, bridges, and public amenities. The reliable provision of essential services and transparent updates regarding advancements and difficulties may close existing trust deficits and promote positive relations between the Thulamela Local Municipality and its constituents. This research suggests that ward committees and councillors proactively facilitate dialogue between the Thulamela Local Municipality and the community. These representatives would act as liaisons, voicing the needs and interests of the residents of the Thulamela Local Municipality while ensuring that municipal actions are duly communicated back to the communities.

Meetings related to the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) should be used as platforms for collaborative planning, where the community can articulate its needs. In contrast, the Thulamela Local Municipality gets to outline its priorities and budget allocations. Residents should be incentivized to file complaints and propose solutions to successfully address problems and inculcate shared ownership of the success of municipal services. The researcher urges the Thulamela Local Municipality to institute a community-oriented approach that assures its relationship with all communities under its jurisdiction is always positive and inclusive. The Thulamela Local Municipality can strengthen its relationship with residents by developing open communication, demonstrating accountability, being responsive to community needs, and fostering long-term social cohesion.

5.5.5 Recommendation on Sustainable Strategies for Improving Service Delivery

According to the findings, the Thulamela Local Municipality should implement long-term measures to ensure the availability and efficiency of its services. Thulamela Local Municipality should have clear policies and procedures for regulating and promoting sustainable municipal service delivery methods. These rules should contain

accountability and transparency systems, ensuring that resources allocated for service delivery are spent efficiently and effectively. The Thulamela Local Municipality must communicate openly and transparently with the communities about service delivery plans and timetables. This can be accomplished by providing regular updates via IDP forums, ward meetings, and digital media to manage community expectations and foster confidence. Ward councillors should proactively communicate with constituents regarding municipal objectives and any service delivery problems they may encounter.

The researcher calls for addressing corruption and financial mismanagement in service delivery systems. Severe steps will be implemented to combat corruption among officials who misuse funds, ensuring that the Thulamela Local Municipality works honestly and accountable. An open audit structure should be in place to control resource allocation and ensure that it is focused on prioritized activities. Ward councillors, community development workers, and municipal officials will receive training and workshops to help them manage and oversee sustainable services, such as resource management, community engagement, and monitoring and evaluation methodologies.

The Thulamela Local Municipality should prioritize infrastructure development and maintenance as part of its long-term service delivery strategy. Systematic appraisals of community needs should guide investments in vital services such as water supply, energy, sanitation, and transportation infrastructure. Projects implemented under the Local Economic Development (LED) and Integrated Development Plan (IDP) frameworks must be adequately funded and aligned with sustainability goals. According to the report, community involvement should be important to any Thulamela Local Municipality's service delivery strategy. This means incorporating locals in planning and decision-making processes, which enables the Thulamela Local Municipality to foster community ownership and responsibility and support and maintain programs.

5.6 RECOMMENDATION ON THE PRINCIPLES OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

This section makes recommendations based on the principles of public administration. The findings support the study's recommendations, which focused on increasing community engagement in the Thulamela Local Municipality. The proposals focus on

policy formation, organizational structure, financial management, personnel administration, work practices, and control mechanisms in improving Thulamela Local Municipality's governance and service delivery.

5.6.1 Recommendation on Policy and Policymaking

The researcher suggests that the Thulamela Local Municipality implement inclusive policies incorporating community engagement at all phases of policymaking. To ensure policies address the community's fundamental challenges, they should be developed following extensive consultations with residents. To combat corruption, the Thulamela Local Municipality must implement strong procedures, such as independent audits and whistleblower protections, to promote transparency and accountability. Furthermore, the policy must emphasize marginalized communities to promote fairness and inclusivity in the delivery of services.

5.6.2 Recommendation on Organizing

Organizational efficiency is critical to attaining Thulamela Local Municipality's aims. The study suggests that the Thulamela Local Municipality restructure its departments to encourage specialization and responsibility. Officials should be organized into groups based on their expertise and work responsibilities, ensuring that qualifications match allocated roles. Clear communication channels must be developed to enable information sharing and decision-making. The Thulamela Local Municipality should also use a participatory management style, in which community representatives help shape service delivery efforts.

5.6.3 Recommendation on Financing

The Thulamela Local Municipality must adopt a long-term finance strategy to support essential service delivery. It is recommended that annual budgets include funding for public engagement initiatives. Partnerships with non-governmental groups and private companies should be encouraged to increase funding for community projects. Furthermore, the Thulamela Local Municipality should improve its income-collecting processes by encouraging residents who can afford to pay for services. Financial literacy campaigns can also help residents see the value of their contributions to local development.

5.6.4 Recommendation on Personnel Administration

The Thulamela Local Municipality should prioritize the employment of qualified and skilled personnel to improve service delivery. Job descriptions must clearly state the necessary credentials and competencies to guarantee that only qualified individuals are chosen. Continuous professional development programs should be created to keep staff updated on the latest public administration practices. Furthermore, promotions should be merit-based, encouraging an environment of excellence and employee motivation.

5.6.5 Recommendation on Work Methods and Procedures

Efficient work procedures are critical to accomplishing organizational goals. The study suggests that Thulamela Local Municipality implements new technologies like digital community input and service delivery platforms to streamline operations. Regular evaluations of work practices should be carried out to detect and correct inefficiencies. Furthermore, the Thulamela Local Municipality can work with private sector organizations to learn from their successful operational methods and apply those lessons to the public sector setting.

5.6.6 Recommendation on Control

Thulamela Local Municipality must establish strong control measures to ensure accountability and efficiency. Regular performance evaluations should be carried out to assess officials' efficacy and service delivery initiatives. Feedback from the community should be used as a critical performance indicator to help the Thulamela Local Municipality fine-tune its strategies. Establishing monitoring and evaluation units inside the Thulamela Local Municipality will guarantee that all policies, programs, and processes are correctly executed and in line with community needs.

5.7 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

The primary focus of this study was to look into strategies for enhancing community engagement in local government, specifically in the Thulamela Local Municipality. While the study produced helpful information about community engagement and municipal service delivery, it was limited to Thulamela Local Municipality. The

researcher suggests conducting similar investigations in other municipalities in the Vhembe District and Limpopo Province. Expanding the scope of the study to include varied geographic and socioeconomic situations would enable comparative analysis, identifying common difficulties and unique potential for increasing community engagement and governance.

Future studies should focus on the impact of digital platforms on community engagement in local government. Investigating the effectiveness of social media, online portals, and other digital platforms in improving communication and service delivery can give helpful information for governments looking to modernize their engagement initiatives. It is also advised that longitudinal studies be done to determine the long-term viability of community engagement techniques. Such research might assess the long-term influence of methods for including residents in decision-making on municipal performance and community satisfaction. Future researchers should work closely with community people and municipal leaders to ensure the accuracy and usefulness of their results. Participants should be made aware of the need to provide accurate and complete information to assist researchers in identifying practical solutions and making meaningful recommendations. Future studies must adhere to the highest ethical standards, especially regarding participant anonymity and privacy. Protecting respondents' identities and managing sensitive material appropriately will help to ensure the research's credibility and integrity.

5.9 CONCLUSION

This study focused on strategies for improving governance and service delivery in the Thulamela Local Municipality through increased community engagement. The first chapter included the introduction, background, problem statement, study aim and objectives, research questions, justification, limitations, operational definitions, and research structure. The study's objectives were to analyze the existing community engagement status, identify important influencing factors, assess the potential of digital technologies in fostering engagement, and offer measures for improving resident decision-making. This study sought to help Thulamela Local Municipality and its citizens by providing actionable insights and solutions to strengthen the relationship between Thulamela Local Municipality and the community while improving municipal service delivery.

Chapter Two reviewed relevant literature, including theoretical and legislative frameworks on community engagement, its role in municipal services, and the associated difficulties and opportunities. The chapter also looked at participatory governance approaches, the role of technology, and empirical evidence for community engagement. This detailed research laid the groundwork for understanding how community engagement may be used to improve openness, accountability, and inclusivity in local governance.

Chapter three presented the research methodology, including a mixed-methodologies approach incorporating quantitative and qualitative methods. The study area, population, sampling techniques, and data collection methods were described in depth. Data were gathered via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with municipal officials, community leaders, and residents. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Ethical considerations such as informed permission and confidentiality were diligently followed, assuring the legitimacy and integrity of the research process.

Chapter Four discussed the results of the data collection method. Quantitative data acquired via questionnaires were evaluated and displayed in tables and graphs, and qualitative data from interviews were thematically analyzed and synthesized. The chapter provides insights into the existing condition of community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality, stressing both obstacles and potential for change. It also investigated people's attitudes about municipal services and their level of engagement in planning and decision-making processes.

Finally, Chapter Five presented the study's recommendations and conclusions. The recommendations were consistent with public administration principles and addressed policy formation, organizational structure, financial management, personnel administration, work procedures, and control mechanisms. Strategies have been proposed to enhance community engagement, improve transparency, and foster inclusive interaction through digital platforms.

The study stressed the necessity of strong community engagement as a foundation for effective local governance. Thulamela Local Municipality can strengthen its ties with residents and enhance service delivery outcomes by encouraging meaningful

engagement, increasing openness, and embracing innovative technologies. The study provides policymakers, municipal leaders, and community stakeholders with valuable insights, as well as a road map for encouraging individuals to participate in decision-making in Thulamela and other similar contexts.

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ANNEXURE A: ETHICAL CLEARANCE

ETHICS APPROVAL CERTIFICATE

RESEARCH AND INNOVATION
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

NAME OF RESEARCHER/INVESTIGATOR:
Ms ME Mulaudzi

STUDENT NO:
19017034

PROJECT TITLE: **Strategies Enhancing Community Engagement In
Local Government: A Case Study Of Thulamela Local
Municipality.**

ETHICAL CLEARANCE NO: **FMCL/24/PDN/45/1511**

SUPERVISORS/ CO-RESEARCHERS/ CO-INVESTIGATORS

NAME	INSTITUTION & DEPARTMENT	ROLE
Dr ST Molloga	UNIVEN, Public Development Administration	Supervisor
Dr NP Lavhelani	UNIVEN, Public Development Administration	Co-Supervisor
Ms ME Mulaudzi	UNIVEN, Public Development Administration	Investigator - Student

Type: **Masters Research**

Risk: **Minimal risk to humans, animals or environment (Category 2)**

Approval Period: **November 2024 – November 2025**

The Research Ethics Social Science Committee (RESSC) hereby approves your project as indicated above.

General Conditions

While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, please note the following.

- The project leader (principal investigator) must report in the prescribed format to the REC:
 - Annually (or as otherwise requested) on the progress of the project, and upon completion of the project.
 - Within 48hrs in case of any adverse event (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the project.
 - Annually a number of projects may be randomly selected for an external audit.
- The approval applies strictly to the protocol as stipulated in the application form. Would any changes to the protocol be deemed necessary during the course of the project, the project leader must apply for approval of these changes at the REC. Would there be deviation from the project protocol without the necessary approval of such changes, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.
- The date of approval indicates the first date that the project may be started. Would the project have to continue after the expiry date; a new application must be made to the REC and new approval received before or on the expiry date.
- In the interest of ethical responsibility, the REC retains the right to:
 - Request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the project,
 - To ask further questions; Seek additional information; Require further modification or monitor the conduct of your research or the informed consent process.
 - Withdraw or postpone approval if:
 - Any unethical principles or practices of the project are revealed or suspected.
 - It becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the REC or that information has been false or misrepresented.
 - The required annual report and reporting of adverse events was not done timely and accurately,
 - New institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.

ISSUED BY:

UNIVERSITY OF VENDA, RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
Date Considered: November 2024

Name of the RESSC Chairperson of the Committee Prof TS Mashau

Signature




ANNEXURE B: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH



Department Of Corporate Services

Private Bag X5066
Thohoyandou
0950
Limpopo Province
Tel: 015 962 7500
Fax: 015 962 4020

Ref : 4/3/4/1
Enquiries : Mabasa N.H
Tel : 015 962 7514
Fax : 015 962 4020

To : Mr. M.E MULAUDZI
From : THULAMELA MUNICIPALITY
Date : 08 NOVEMBER 2024

Subject : PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT THULAMELA MUNICIPALITY

1. The above matter refers.
2. Kindly note that permission to conduct research has been granted.
3. Contact Human Resources Section for more information.
4. Hoping that this will meet your favourable considerations.


MUNICIPAL MANAGER
MAKUMULE M.T

THULAMELA
MUNICIPALITY

ANNEXURE C: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT DATA



Senior Manager Corporate Services
f/y
5/11/24
Ha for your
attention
Assn. Philu
07/11/2024




FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT, COMMERCE AND LAW
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC AND DEVELOPMENT
ADMINISTRATION P/bag X 5050, Thohoyandou 0950
Tel: 015 962 9384/ 072 3184024
Email: Sanah.matloga@univen.ac.za

From : Dr. S.T Matloga
To : Thulamela Local Municipality
Date : 28/10/2024

Request for permission to conduct a study by Mr. Mulaudzi Mulisa Elijah (19017034)

The above matter refers to:

- 1) Mr. Mulaudzi Mulisa Elijah (19017034) is a registered student of Master of Administration at the University of Venda under the supervision of Dr. S.T. Matloga.
- 2) His study is titled "Strategies Enhancing Community Engagement in Municipal Services: A Case Study of Thulamela Local Municipality."
- 3) Therefore, as his supervisor, I humbly and respectfully request, through the Office of the Municipal Manager, for Mr Mulaudzi M.E to be granted permission to collect data from the Municipality.
- 4) Hoping that you will find all the above in order.

Kind regards



28/10/2024

**Dr. Sanah Tebogo
Matloga**

Lecturer

-  University Road, University of Venda,
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015 962 8042

ANNEXURE D: INSTRUMENT - INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

STRATEGIES ENHANCING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THULAMELA LOCAL

This study focuses on enhancing community engagement in local government services within the Thulamela Local Municipality. I request your participation by sharing your perspectives on community engagement strategies in this area. Please put an X where you feel appropriate and answer the following questions. This is an opportunity for you to reflect on your perceptions about how these strategies are implemented. There are no right or wrong answers, so please respond to each question to the best of your ability.

SECTION A: PERSONAL INFORMATION OF PARTICIPANT

1. Gender of participant

Male	
Female	

2. Age of participant

Less than 21 years	
22 to 30 years	
31 to 40 years	
41 to 50 years	
51 years and above	

3. Category of participant

Municipal Manager	
Mayor	
Chief Financial Officer	
Senior Manager	
Spokesperson	
Traditional Leader	
Ward Councillor	
Non-managerial municipal employees	
Community Member	

4. Qualification of the participant

National senior certificate (Grade 12) and below	
Bachelor's degree/National diploma	
Honours degree/B-Tech	
Master's degree/M-Tech	
Doctoral degree/D-Tech	

SECTION B: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

5. In your view, what role does community engagement play in improving service delivery within Thulamela Local Municipality?

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6. What is your perception of the current level of community engagement within Thulamela Local Municipality?

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7. What challenges do you believe hinder effective community engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality?

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8. How do you think digital platforms (e.g., social media, online portals) could improve community engagement?

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9. What strategies or initiatives are currently in place to encourage community involvement in decision-making processes?

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10. What additional steps can be taken to strengthen the relationship between the municipality and community members?

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11. What role do you think transparency and accountability play in community engagement?

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12. Are there any other recommendations you would like to make for enhancing community engagement in the Thulamela Local Municipality?

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“THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTRIBUTION”

ANNEXURE E: INSTRUMENT – QUESTIONNAIRE

STRATEGIES ENHANCING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THULAMELA LOCAL

This study explores strategies for enhancing community engagement within Thulamela Local Municipality. I request your participation by providing your perspective on community engagement initiatives in Thulamela Local Municipality. There are no right or wrong answers. Please place a cross (X) where you feel it is appropriate.

SECTION A: BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION OF RESPONDENT

1. Gender of participant

Male	
Female	

2. Age of participant

Less than 21 years	
22 to 30 years	
31 to 40 years	
41 to 50 years	
51 years and above	

3. Category of participant

Municipal Manager	
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Mayor	
Chief Financial Officer	
Senior Manager	
Spokesperson	
Traditional Leader	
Ward Councillor	
Non-managerial municipal employees	
Community Member	

4. Qualification of the participant

National senior certificate (Grade 12) and below	
Bachelor's degree/National diploma	
Honours degree/B-Tech	
Master's degree/M-Tech	
Doctoral degree/D-Tech	

SECTION B: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN MUNICIPAL SERVICES

Item No. 1	The Role of Community Engagement in Improving Municipal Services	Strong Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5.	Involving the community in decision-making can improve municipal service delivery.					
6.	Community engagement helps to create a sense of ownership among residents.					
7.	Engaging the community can increase transparency and accountability in the municipality.					
8.	Community input leads to more effective use of resources in service delivery.					
9.	Collaboration between the community and the municipality fosters social cohesion.					

Item No. 2	Current Status of Community Engagement in Thulamela Local Municipality	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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10.	The municipality provides regular updates on community engagement initiatives,					
11.	The relationship between the municipality and the community is healthy.					
12.	The community is actively involved in service planning and delivery.					
13.	The municipality utilises feedback from the community to improve services.					
14.	Current engagement strategies adequately address community needs.					

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Item No. 3	The potential of Digital Platforms for Community Engagement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
15.	Social media platforms can improve communication with the community.					
16.	Online portals can facilitate access to municipal services for residents.					
17.	Digital tools enhance transparency by providing real-time information to residents.					

18.	Using digital platforms for community engagement promotes inclusivity.					
19.	Digital engagement platforms could reduce logistical barriers to engagement.					

Item No. 4	Barriers to Effective Community Engagement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
20.	Lack of internet access limits community engagement opportunities.					
21.	Limited financial resources hinder community engagement efforts.					
22.	Socioeconomic disparities affect the inclusivity of community engagement initiatives.					
23.	Language barriers impact effective communication with the community.					
24.	Insufficient trust between the municipality and community members is a barrier.					

Item No. 5	Strategies to Enhance Community Engagement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
25.	Holding regular public meetings would improve engagement.					
26.	Establishing clear communication channels would foster trust.					
27.	Engaging local leaders in decision-making processes would strengthen engagement.					
28.	Providing transparency in decision-making would improve community relations.					
29.	Empowering communities through training and workshops can promote engagement.					

“THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION”

ANNEXURE F: LETTER TO THE RESPONDENTS

Inquiry: Mulaudzi ME

Cell: 0730754490

Email: mulaudzime2204@gmail.com

P.O. Box 2347

Sibasa

0970

11 November 2024

Dear Sir or Madam

I, Mulaudzi Mulisa Elijah, am a University of Venda student who registered for a Master of Administration in The Department of Public & Development Administration Faculty of Management Commerce and Law. I am researching Strategies Enhancing Community Engagement in Local Government: A Case Study of Thulamela Local Municipality.

Please be part of the study by providing your understanding of the research topic as written above. The information that you will provide will be used for this study.

Thanking you in anticipation.

Yours sincerely

.....

Mulaudzi ME

Student Number: 19017034

ANNEXURE G: INFORMED CONSENT

I, Mulaudzi Mulisa Elijah, am a University of Venda student registered for a Master of Administration in The Department of Public & Development Administration Faculty of Management Commerce and Law. I am researching Strategies Enhancing Community Engagement in Local Government: A Case Study of Thulamela Local Municipality. In this study, the researcher will provide informed consent to the respondents for adequate information regarding the research. This will help the respondents understand the study and be free to participate or decline participation voluntarily. The participant's identities will be kept secret during and after the research study. In addition, participants have the right to remain anonymous.

Participation in the study is voluntary, and respondents may withdraw without penalty. All questionnaire and interview data will be handled with confidentiality by the researcher. Participants can refuse to answer specific questions if they feel uncomfortable collecting data. Furthermore, respondents will not be exposed to harmful situations or positions where they would be compromised. The respondents will be informed that they will not be exposed to physical threats during the research process. The respondents' information will not be used for any other purpose except to help the researcher meet the academic requirements. Any questions or any further clarification concerning the study can be directed to:

.....

Mulaudzi ME

Date

Cell : 0730754490

Email :

ANNEXURE H : LANGUAGE EDITOR CERTIFICATE

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES, SOCIAL SCIENCES AND EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, MEDIA STUDIES AND LINGUISTICS

Enquiries: Dr MJ Maluleke

13 JANUARY 2025

To whom it may concern

This serves to certify that I have edited a dissertation for **Mulaudzi Mulisa Elijah** (student number **19017034**). He is a student registered in the Department of Public and Development Administration in the Faculty of Management, Commerce, and Law Sciences. The editing entails correcting grammatical errors, rephrasing sentences, ensuring consistency in the use of British spelling, and improving readability.

The title of the study is: **Strategies enhancing community engagement in local government: A case study of Thulamela Local Municipality**. I have read the whole document and made suggestions reflected through track changes, as well as correcting some minor errors.

Yours Sincerely



Mzamani J. Maluleke



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