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COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF WARD COUNCILLORS' COMMUNICATION IN SERVICE DELIVERY PROTEST AREAS: THE DESIRABILITY OF A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION APPROACH

ABSTRACT

Service delivery protests have increased alarmingly year-on-year. Protests appear to be community members' only recourse in expressing their frustration concerning the perceived lack of delivery of municipal services. Indications are that a lack of engagement by ward councillors is adding greatly to these frustrations. At the same time, very little is known about how ward councillors communicate. The purpose of the study was to explore ward councillors' current communication approach as perceived by community members in Sebokeng, known for the prevalence of former violent service delivery protests, and to evaluate the desirability of a strategic communication approach. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with six focus groups of different ages. The findings indicate that ward councillors are perceived as not visible to community members and that interactions with ward councillors are experienced as monologues and top-down. Consequently, community members feel unheard, forgotten, and ultimately disengaged. At the same time, community members express the need to self-organise and collaborate with ward councillors in solving community issues, as long as it is coupled with tangible delivery. The research provides insights into volatile community sentiments suggesting a pattern with previous findings, as well as suggestions for a strategic communication approach that may increase the legitimacy of ward councillors in communities.

Keywords: ward councillors; service delivery protests; community members; stakeholder theory; stakeholder engagement; strategic communication; accountability; collaboration; self-organisation; bottom-up communication

INTRODUCTION

There have been a number of reports on the incidence of service delivery protests in South Africa. Saba and Van der Merwe (2013) reported that over 3000 service

delivery protests occurred between 2008 and 2013. However, in the same period, Municipal IQ, which only tracks service delivery protests against municipalities, reported 655 (Heese 2018). Conclusive statistics are not available as there is no single organisation that solely measures the occurrence of these; however, media reports as well as Municipal IQ's data show an increase in the prevalence of service delivery protests. According to Heese (2018), an economist at Municipal IQ (a specialised local government data and intelligence organisation that collects data on service delivery protests staged against municipalities), there was a significant increase in violent service delivery protests in 2018 and there were also more service delivery protests in 2018 than in any other year since 2005. Protests in the first quarter of 2019 surged to a new record (Municipal IQ 2019).

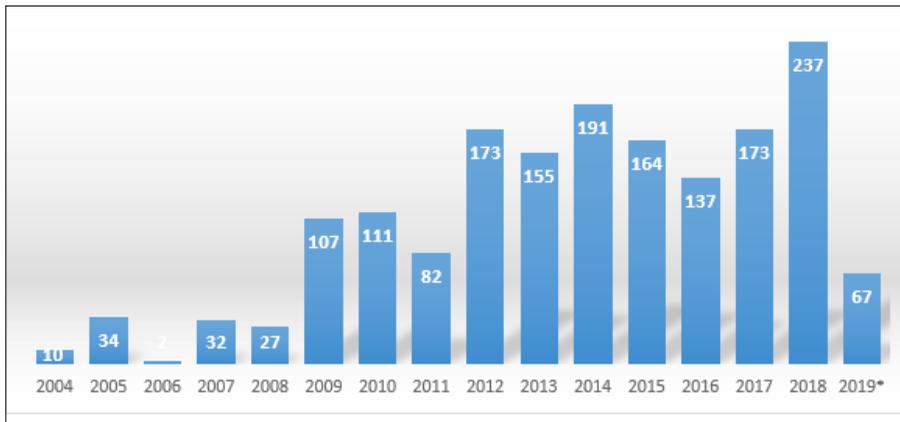


FIGURE 1: MAJOR SERVICE DELIVERY PROTESTS BY YEAR (2004-2019*)

Source: Municipal IQ 2019 *January-March 2019

Apartheid and its legacy

Issues surrounding service delivery protests need to be contextualised within wider debates occurring globally and on the continent with respect to governance, social change, activism and development. Authors differ as to whether activism involving protest, conflict and violence should be distinguished from community organising, which is the result of a coherent, long-term strategy to effect social change (the power versus protest debate) (Alinsky 1987; Bobo *et al.* 2001; Chambers 2003). Nonetheless, it appears that protest is but one aspect of a larger social struggle, which in South Africa should be seen against the backdrop of apartheid and its legacy, as well as ensuing transitional politics and democratisation.

The British colonial era in the late 19th century and the 20th century resettled racial groups under the pretence of responding to disease epidemics in neighbourhoods that were overcrowded (Findley & Ogbu 2011). The land segregation was formalised and enforced by the Natives' Land Act of 1913, which reserved 90% of South African land for a small minority white population, and the 10% left over for the non-white

population (Bond 2000: 405; Findley & Ogbu 2011; Nodjimbadem 2015). Allan and Heese (2013) confirm that most of the service delivery protests have occurred (and continue to occur) in informal settlements in the largest metropolitan municipalities. Moreover, it needs to be acknowledged that “these cities experience the highest population growth rates of all our localities; and in fact there is a strong statistical link between high levels of migration and service delivery protests” (*ibid.*). These migrants experience lack of access to economic opportunities, housing and services. “The rapid growth of informal settlements as well as metros’ unwillingness to accept them as a permanent reality in their midst has meant a slow response to the service delivery needs of communities in these areas” (Allan & Heese 2013). This results in community members being frustrated by a lack of visible progression, while they witness other communities progressing. Lately, the issue of land expropriation without compensation has added fuel to the fire.

Reasons for protests

As reported by Coetzer and Terblanche (2013), protests occurred at least every second day and involved more than two million South Africans annually since 2008. Some documented reasons for protests include costly electricity, lack of water and electricity, lack of economic and housing development, infrastructure and health care, the exorbitant cost of medicine, allegations of corruption, poor living conditions, and more recently the issue of land reform (*Mail & Guardian* 2014a; *Mail & Guardian* 2014b; *Mail & Guardian* 2015; *Mail & Guardian* 2017; News24 2018a, News24 2018b).

Allan and Heese (2013) define service delivery protests as “galvanised by inadequate local services or tardy service delivery, the responsibility for which lies with a municipality”. A study by Paradza *et al.* (2010) found that the inability to communicate effectively with all residents in the Randfontein Municipality indirectly affected service delivery. According to the Municipal IQ Hotspot Databases, the most recently reported issues leading to protests point to “a clear dissatisfaction with the management of a municipality”, which includes councillor accountability (Municipal IQ 2019). On the other hand, a study conducted by Overton-de Klerk and Oelofse (2010) highlighted the need to combat the lack of hope and escalating violence in poor communities by establishing ongoing structures of community engagement and dialogue, involving formal as well as informal leadership, thereby facilitating a sense of connectedness and bottom-up participation in challenges facing the community.

Against this background, the purpose of this study was to explore community members’ perceptions of ward councillors’ current communication approach in service delivery protest areas, and to explore the desirability of an alternative leadership communication approach based on strategic communication principles.

Research objectives

The objectives of the research were as follows:

- ◆ To explore ward councillors' current communication approach as perceived by community members in selected service delivery-stricken protest areas.
- ◆ To explore the desirability of a strategic communication approach in a community where service delivery protests are prevalent.

WARD COUNCILLORS AND THEIR ROLE

According to the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), a ward councillor is “directly elected to represent and serve the people in a specific ward, and is the chairperson of the ward committee” (SALGA 2006: 53). Furthermore, ward councillors are instructed by SALGA (2006) to be the following:

- ◆ accessible to the public in order to encourage their input in government matters;
- ◆ communicate all activities to community members in order to increase transparency and to promote public participation; and
- ◆ hold regular public meetings in order to interact directly with interest groups in order to promote democracy by listening to the views of the community.

Drawing on the instructions of SALGA (2006) and the work of Paradza *et al.* (2010), the role of ward councillors who “serve as representatives of the people” (SALGA 2006: 48) can be summarised as follows:

- ◆ to be close to the community, both in terms of proximity as well as to their communities' activities and concerns;
- ◆ to keep their communities informed with respect to council decisions, programmes and budgets that affect them;
- ◆ to give feedback on their communities' questions and concerns to various councils and committees;
- ◆ to promote public involvement and invite communities to confide in them on all matters to assist them;
- ◆ to be open and transparent in their activities and decision-making to ensure democracy as well as legitimacy; and
- ◆ to adhere to a code of conduct, amongst others not to acquire any direct benefit from work done for the municipality, not engage in any other paid work without council consent, and not used privileged information for their own gain.

The ward councillor's role can be compared to that of a “boundary spanner”, a construct referred to by Overton-de Klerk and Verwey (2013: 16). Boundary spanners are responsible for making connections with external sources and for bringing new information into the organisation. In the same vein, ward councillors as boundary spanners have the ability to sense, hear and experience community members' day-

to-day challenges because they are based within the community. The ward councillor should be able to mirror the expectations of his/her environment and thus make efforts to address them. As described by SALGA (2006:120), "the ward councillor needs to be in touch with the issues in the area, understand the key problems and monitor development and service delivery".

A number of studies have highlighted the role of the ward councillor and the lack of communication in service delivery challenges facing local government. One of the key municipal weaknesses that Paradza *et al.* (2010) identified with respect to service delivery issues within the Randfontein Municipality was the incompetence of councillors and other officials to communicate effectively with all residents in the Municipality. According to Allan and Heese (2013), protests occurring in metropolitan municipalities illuminate the issue of a lack of access to information due to a lack of communication from ward councillors, resulting in frustration, and the spreading of rumours of favouritism, corruption and mismanagement.

All the aforementioned studies emphasised that communication can improve matters – "Good communication can play a mitigating role in service delivery challenges relating to a shortage of resources in the municipality. Informed residents who are aware of municipal weaknesses and challenges and what officials are doing to address these challenges, are less likely to be frustrated with poor service delivery" (Paradza *et al.* 2010: 37). Allan and Heese (2013) share these sentiments by stating the following:

[l]ocal councils, through ward councillors and local officials, need to develop a specific communication strategy to include communities in informal settlements in the processes of local councils. This will not only serve to include people in planning processes and alleviate the current frustration that most of these communities have expressed of being excluded, but will also deal with the current lack of communication in these areas and the spread of often false or exaggerated rumours of corruption, nepotism and mismanagement.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Strategic communication can be described as purposeful communication in an organisation or institution to achieve its mission (Hallahan *et al.* 2007). It not only includes institutionalised forms of public communication, but all of the organisation's communication. This means that communication has moved beyond a role or function and "through its enactment is reflexively shaping the organisation itself" (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey 2013: 370). Strategic communication thus represents an important paradigm shift from a functional perspective that focuses on the top-down production of communication messages to a co-creational perspective, which sees stakeholders as co-creators of meaning and communication (Hallahan *et al.* 2007; Zeffass & Huck 2007; Overton-de Klerk & Verwey 2013). According to Verwey (2015: 8), "All stakeholders become active participants in shaping strategy through emergence".

Hallahan *et al.* (2007: 7) furthermore emphasise that strategic communication focuses upon "how the organisation presents and promotes itself through the intentional

activities of its leaders, employees, and communication practitioners". This study views ward councillors as the local government's voice; therefore, they have a crucial role to play in purposefully communicating with community members as stakeholders, in line with the mission of local government. According to Chapter 7 Section 151-164 of the South African Constitution (1996), one of the objectives of local government is "to encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in the matters of local government", which places the ward councillors' communication approach as a top priority to achieve the local government's objective.

Paradigm shifts in strategic communication

Building on the work of Hallahan *et al.* (2007), Ströh (2007), Zeffass and Huck (2007) and others, Overton-de Klerk and Verwey (2013) characterise the emerging paradigm shifts in strategic communication as follows:

From top-down to bottom-up

Communication has shifted from a one-way information transfer aimed at ensuring compliance to a participative, inclusive process involving stakeholders at all levels to enable buy-in and change from the bottom up.

From monologue to dialogue

Communication has moved from one voice to a diverse engagement of many voices where a multiplicity of viewpoints and freedom of speech are encouraged, which could lead to creative solutions to challenges.

From control to self-organisation

Communication that moves from controlling the flow of information to communication that creates an environment conducive to self-organisation, where stakeholders spontaneously participate in dialogue from the bottom up towards creative solutions.

From consensus to dissent

In a climate of complexity, where heterogeneity has become unavoidable, the role of the communication manager has moved beyond the seeking of consensus to one that ensures multiple voices are heard and even encourages dissent, which may give rise to new forms of understanding.

From communication management to communication influence

The view that strategic communication represents a paradigm shift from a functional perspective that focuses on the top-down production of communication messages to a co-creational perspective, which sees stakeholders as co-creators of meaning and communication; hence, regarding communication professionals' roles as facilitators of communication discourse and social influence.

From corporate social responsibility to accountability

Communication that moves from using stakeholders as a means to an end to seeing stakeholders as “ends” in themselves. Communication that enhances accountability by the organisation to its stakeholders and to society through transparency.

From integration to collaboration

The acknowledgement that communication messaging can no longer be strategically controlled or coordinated top down and that increasing complexity requires collaboration with, and ultimately co-creation by stakeholders beyond the control of the organisation.

These shifts highlight the active inclusion of stakeholders in decision-making and in key interactions that, it can be argued, appear not to be prevalent in communities where service delivery protests occur. Therefore, strategic communication provides a tool for both corporate and government organisations to better communicate and collaborate with their stakeholders.

Strategic communication is a form of participatory communication (Hallahan *et al.* 2007: 16) that invites dialogue in organisational activities. True participation extends communication from being heard to being represented in the final decision-making process (Ströh 2007: 132). The strategic communication approach can therefore be differentiated from a linear top-down approach by:

- ◆ an evolving and emerging process of discourse and negotiations with affected stakeholders;
- ◆ the facilitation of conversation and discussion for change to evolve spontaneously through collaboration;
- ◆ the encouragement of self-organisation through dialogue and debate; and
- ◆ the positive management of conflict and dissent among many diverse voices, which increases the perceived legitimacy and encourages the accountability of the communication.

STAKEHOLDER THEORY

Stakeholder theory, as formulated by thought leader R.E. Freeman, drew upon the academic fields of sociology, economics, politics and ethics, and especially the literature on corporate planning systems theory, corporate social responsibility and organisational theory (Mainardes *et al.* 2011: 229). The stakeholder theory proposes that an organisation has a relationship with all its stakeholders in order to understand what its stakeholders expect from it to be able to assist them and, in turn, assist the community (Steib 2009; Alpaslan *et al.* 2009). This approach is ideal when facing a crisis because when an organisation has a relationship with all its stakeholders it is able to detect problems at an early stage, and thus can respond effectively and recover quickly. This also applies to the role of the ward councillor in detecting problems in the community – if the ward councillor is intimately integrated in the community. Ward councillors need to make

decisions that take into account the interests of all community members because they all have the ability to affect how the government is run.

Stakeholders

A stakeholder is defined as an individual, informal group, organisation or institution who impacts or may be impacted by an organisation's policies and operations (Mainardes *et al.* 2011). Stakeholders do not always have to have a direct stake in the organisation, but are viewed as influencers and recognised according to moral and philosophical guidelines that go beyond business and legal expectations (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey 2013). Stakeholders are the people who essentially have the power to make or break the organisation because without their approval the organisation will not be given the right to operate. Conversely, with the support of the stakeholders, the success of the business is possible. This becomes more apparent in times of crises. A crisis is a critical situation that has the possibility of turning into a negative outcome for the organisation, company or industry and its publics, products, services and reputation (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck 2007; Wilcox & Cameron 2009). An organisation's ability to overcome a crisis is dependent on its assumptions and knowledge concerning its stakeholders' behaviour in the context of the crisis (Alpaslan *et al.* 2009: 2), making the stakeholder theory an appropriate guideline in overcoming crises. For instance, when ward councillors have a relationship with the community based on trust, credibility, transparency and respect, they are able to detect and attend to community problems at an early stage; thus, they are able to respond effectively to them.

RESEARCH DESIGN

As this was not an area that had been researched before, an explorative qualitative research design, within the context of an interpretive paradigm (Struwig & Stead 2007; Babbie & Mouton 2014), was regarded as most suitable to obtain an in-depth understanding of community members' perceptions, thoughts and feelings with respect to ward councillors' communication style in a service delivery protest area.

Data collection

The data collection was done by means of focus groups. This kind of interviewing technique provides data that is rich in ideas and provides opinions and attitudes from the participants' point of view (Du Plooy 2007: 199). Due to the nature of the study, a careful observation of the participants, through interaction and extensive note taking was adhered to (Gravetter & Forzano 2009: 147).

The population of this study was communities who had experienced service delivery protests. In the two years before the research was conducted there were reports of violent service delivery protests in a number of communities, namely (but not limited to) Bronkhorstspuit, Sebokeng, Mothotlung, Nelspruit, the North West Province, Sasolburg, Protea Glen, the Eastern Cape Province, and Boksburg (*City Press* 2014; Coetzer & Terblanche 2013; Saba & Van der Merwe 2013). In the reports, the Sebokeng community, situated in the South of Gauteng, experienced some of the most violent

service delivery protests, where a community member was shot dead during a service delivery protest in 2014 (*City Press* 2014). Residents of this community were protesting for decent housing and demanded that the then President, Jacob Zuma, address them instead of the Premier of Gauteng. These were indications of a community that was deeply frustrated and displeased with its relationship with the government. Conversely, when one of the researchers was on route to conduct research in the area on 16 April 2016, a delivery protest had just been dispersed. During discussions with the research participants, it was established that it was a service delivery protest, which confirmed the prevalence of this type of protest action in the area, two years after the reported violent service delivery protests.

Nonprobability sampling was used to recruit the participants, as the entire population was not completely known. The sampling method was based on factors, such as common sense and ease, with an effort to maintain representativeness and avoid bias (Gravetter & Forzano 2009: 134). Snowball and purposive sampling methods were used because community members were difficult to locate as the researcher was not a member of the community (Babbie & Mouton 2014: 167). Purposive sampling is a method based on the researcher's judgement with the intention of researching a small subset of the larger group, which would be near impossible to access for the study (Babbie & Mouton 2014: 166).

Initially, four focus groups consisting of a minimum of six participants each and within the two age groupings of 18 to 24, and 25 and above, were requested to participate. Two of the focus groups the researchers were able to recruit had a mixture of age groups and did not have the required minimum six participants. Therefore, two further focus groups were requested to participate, which consisted of at least four participants each within the desired age groups. Adding more focus groups was also a means to ensure that data saturation could be achieved. The first four of the focus groups were conducted on 16 April 2016 and the other two were conducted on 24 April 2016. While there was no assumption that the rest of the population was homogeneous, the reason for having different age groups was to evaluate whether relatively younger and older groups differed with respect to their views of ward councillors' communication.

TABLE 1: SAMPLE REALISATION – FOCUS GROUPS

FOCUS GROUP NUMBER	AREA	AGE GROUP	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
1	Sebokeng	25 and above	5
2	Sebokeng	Mix (18-24 with inclusion of two above 25)	5
3	North Sebokeng	Mix (18-24 with inclusion of one above 25)	4
4	North Sebokeng	18-24	4
5	North Sebokeng	25 and above	5
6	North Sebokeng	18-24	4

A semi-structured discussion guide, based on the literature, was developed for these focus groups in order to allow for spontaneous and unprompted responses from the participants, yet providing enough structure to make a comparable analysis possible. The participants were asked follow-up questions using probing and mirroring techniques, which elicit more information about the participants' attitudes, emotions and behaviours (Du Plooy 2007: 159).

Qualitative data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, where the responses from the participants were grouped into themes emerging from the thematic analysis according to the frequency of repetition of the sentiments. Where appropriate, verbatim statements from the participants were used to illustrate the themes. The trustworthiness of the study was further increased through extensive field notes and transcripts, as well as ensuring that data saturation was achieved (Babbie & Mouton 2014: 276).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings were analysed and grouped according to 11 emerging and dominant themes.

Ward councillors are not visible

All the participants stated that their ward councillors were not visible at all. Most of them did not know who their ward councillors were.

I don't know him. Honestly. I don't know him. I don't even know his value here (Group 4).

The participants in each focus group highlighted, with full support from the other participants, that their ward councillors have houses within the community but generally do not live in them. Instead, their primary houses were located in suburban areas and, as a result, they were out of touch with the community.

Other participants expressed the opinion that their ward councillors availed themselves to certain people, for example ANC members, but not the wider community. When the participants were asked whether the violent service delivery protests could have been prevented if their ward councillors were more visible, all of the participants agreed without hesitation. When the community members were asked how they thought their ward councillors could become effective communicators, most of the responses were: "Come to the people".

Community members are disempowered

The sentiment was repeatedly expressed that community members required assistance and support in self-organising, which they believed they did not receive. One participant stated that ward councillors were possibly delivering on some aspects, but the issue related to the discrepancies between themselves and communities who had a majority of whites who did not complain about service delivery. This alluded to

the possibility that white communities were better serviced and received better support when attempting to self-organise:

...But then people who try, they struggle with funding, that's the problem as well. And as compared to the white communities, it's a different story. So a lot of time it hurts; for a white child these days we'll say life is too easy for them, it's like they are destined to be successful...I've been looking for jobs all over and still I'm unemployed... (Group 3).

Ward councillors do not communicate with community members

No, they don't speak to us... I remember this other day when we were fighting about the electricity and water. So after he was called, he didn't come to us, he didn't communicate with us. He was scared of the community; he doesn't want to speak to us because he's never come to talk to us about what we need... (Group 3).

The participants were asked what issues their ward councillors typically communicated to them. The majority of the participants cited their community infrastructure, such as their rates and taxes, Apollo streetlights, clinics, electricity, libraries and potholes. Alarming, some of the participants expressed that their ward councillors did not communicate anything to them. Community members expressed a desire to have two-way communication with their ward councillors in order to relay their issues and challenge their ward councillors to create solutions collectively and collaboratively. However, the participants emphasised that dialogic communication would not entirely solve the problem because communication without delivery would be pointless as their needs would not have been met.

Ward councillors do not keep their promises

The participants responded that their ward councillors were not perceived as legitimate communicators because they believed that ward councillors made promises that they did not keep. The perception was that they communicated promises to them before election times and once given the power to lead the community, they disappeared and did not fulfil the promises they made.

They only come for votes; giving people food parcels and after the elections, we don't get those food parcels or anything, which is bad. People are flippen disappointed (Group 1).

The participants observed that they were promised a number of things, which were not delivered but the then President, Jacob Zuma, was able to fulfil his exorbitant needs and the government was willing to support him in doing so; however, the community was left without houses and a lack of service delivery.

Ward councillors must take responsibility

Stemming from the accusations that the ward councillors did not deliver, as they initially promised, statements were made that ward councillors did not take responsibility for their lack of delivery and that they were not accountable. When ward councillors were perceived as making empty promises, added to the fact that they were not visible in

the community, it created the perception that they were not accountable; this therefore led to continued protests.

They will keep fighting until they do what they are supposed to do. Until things happen and they do what they are supposed to do, people will keep fighting (Group 1).

Corruption is a key contributor to dissatisfaction

A dominant theme, which was constant throughout all the groups, was the corruption of the ward councillors. Almost all of the participants relayed examples or agreed on instances where the only way to either get a job or a tender, or get involved in meetings and community activities and developments, was if you had a membership card of the ward councillor's political party.

There was a time I went to go apply at the municipality. I spoke to this other woman and she said to me, you know what, for you to get a job here you have to be registered as an ANC what what...you have to have the membership for ANC, or for whatever party that is in... (Group 3).

Or DA. Even DA itself has come to do its thing this side. You have to have a card so that the jobs will arise (Group 3).

The community members expressed the view that they did not receive the same opportunities as those that were known by their local government officials; this included bursaries and subsidies that the community was entitled to. Corruption was named in media reports as one of the contributing factors to service delivery protests. This does not form part of strategic communication; however, it identifies the kind of communication that is not accepted within the community, but it prevails with no consequences. Corruption hinders a collaborative stakeholder approach.

Community members want to work with ward councillors

A recurring theme throughout all six focus groups was the desire to be a part of community activities, particularly those who were unemployed in order for them to gain some work experience.

Whenever there's a project happening in our ward...if there are projects you see people who are not working, take them into those projects so they can work (Group 1).

Community members would like to become involved in the community, assist the community with whatever that is lacking, and at the same time obtain experience and be employed. The participants observed that meetings were held but only a select few were invited and no feedback was given to the community post these meetings.

Ward councillors do not work for the people

The majority of the participants declared that their ward councillors lacked a sense of compassion. They relayed examples of how when the ward councillors wanted to be elected, they would engage with them and make multiple promises, but when they

were elected, they forgot about the community and their needs, and only looked out for themselves by purchasing expensive cars and buying houses.

When we see them, only around elections and then after we see them in social places, buying expensive bottles of alcohol at Emerald [Casino], at functions, where they host their parties. Imagine one person drinking a bottle of R7000, King George the 7th, Johnny Walker Blue Label. Do you know how much that costs? Whereas there is someone who...who sleeps in a shack, he can't even read, he reads using a candle. Imagine! (Group 1).

Unheard and forgotten

Seemingly, community members felt unheard and forgotten. Numerous participants conveyed this sentiment, who said that they had been forgotten. They highlighted how other areas, such as Soweto, received more attention than they did; they want it to be remembered that they were also part of the Gauteng Province.

We are also Gauteng. Joburg and Soweto, Vaal. Most of the things they take as Soweto; they are the only region that is better than Vaal. When you are from Vaal it is like you are from some other place... We are in the same province, we are in Gauteng. But they take Vaal as something that is out (Group 2).

These experiences point to a deep disappointment and hurt of being forgotten as an area. This theme serves as a potential consequence of the lack of communication by ward councillors with their community members. More so, it strongly signals the possibility that community members feel completely out of touch from their ward councillor, which leads to disengaged community members.

Experiences of the two age groups

It is apparent that the two age groups, 18 to 24 and 25 and above, had very similar experiences of their ward councillors' communication, as well as their leadership styles. Both age groups opined that their ward councillors were corrupt and criminals, and that they did not fulfil their promises. These age groups agreed that service delivery protests occurred because community members believed that it was the only way to be heard, as the ward councillors did not deliver on their promises and did not communicate with them.

As much as the two groups were in agreement about their experiences, the two groups placed different emphasis on certain issues. The 18 to 24 age group placed emphasis on the criminal activity in the community, on substance abuse, as well as the need for jobs for the youth. They also placed importance on the need to involve the youth in job experiences, such as learnerships or internships, because the youth was disengaged, which resulted in them participating in service delivery protests.

The 25 and above age group emphasised the corruption of the ward councillors. They were of the view that the only way to gain access to information on developments in the community or job opportunities was to have membership of the ward councillor's political party. All these shared experiences of ward councillors and their communication approach have implications for the community's future, service delivery protests, as well as communication practices.

DISCUSSION

The findings point to extreme frustration experienced by community members with respect to the ward councillors' communication approach – to the extent that possibly their only perceived recourse was to violently protest in order to vent their anger. Lack of communication, lack of trust and lack of opportunity to participate appeared to be the main issues, which supported the findings of earlier studies (Paradza *et al.* 2010; Allan & Heese 2013). The participants relayed numerous examples of perceived disengagement from their ward councillors – they were not being heard and their needs were not being met because of corruption. A potential result of this despondency and disengagement was for them to find solace in activities that helped them to forget about reality, by becoming intoxicated. This was mentioned frequently in the discussions. This could point to a broken community or, at the very least, a broken youth within the community because of the number of challenges they have experienced as the community members of Sebokeng. This is consistent with previous findings that a lack of hope lay at the root of social ills, such as substance abuse, in poor communities (Overton-de Klerk & Oelofse 2010: 402).

According to the findings, ward councillors did not disseminate information and, even if they did, they did not engage in strategic communication, which enabled bottom-up communication and dialogue and allowed for dissent and self-organisation. That residents clearly had a desire for their ward councillors to utilise such strategic communication principles in their communication approach was underscored when a participant expressed his appreciation of having the researcher engage with them on their experiences and suggested that if their ward councillor did the same, a better relationship would exist between them and their ward councillor. This signalled the importance that community members placed on the visibility and engagement by ward councillors as stakeholders in the spirit of Ubuntu (Steib 2009; Bertsch 2012). It also supports the findings of Overton-de Klerk and Oelofse (2010: 406) with respect to poor communities as corporate stakeholders who emphasise the importance of entrenching a culture of listening and engagement with community members and other stakeholders (Rensburg 2012: 11; BBC Media Action 2016).

The findings strongly indicate that the ward councillors were perceived by community participants to be out of touch with community members and their realities; therefore, missing the opportunity to influence them. The perceived absence of the ward councillors evidently played a role in the state of the community. If ward councillors are removed from their communities, they cannot be influenced by community members, nor are they able to influence their community members. This certainly is a lost opportunity for both parties. As indicated in the findings, community members had ideas to develop the community, create jobs, and create rehabilitation and sports centres, yet they were unable to share these ideas to their ward councillors because they were perceived as not visible and unreachable. When communication influence is heightened, opportunities for self-organisation are made possible, which lessens the onus on the ward councillor to deliver in certain respects. This is an advantage of the shift from management to influence in strategic communication (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey 2013). A potential

result of this shared social influence could be heightened community involvement and a more positive experience of ward councillors' communication.

If regarded through the lens of strategic communication, ward councillors were further perceived by the community participants to lack legitimacy as communicators for not delivering on their mandate and for using a top-down approach. Hence, they did not afford their communities the opportunity to self-organise through empowerment; nor did they collaborate with community members on community developments.

At the same time, the findings suggested that community members wanted to collaborate with ward councillors to solve issues faced by the community and to curb unemployment. They also had a desire for dialogue with their ward councillors; however, this dialogue needed to be jointly executed with accountability and service delivery. As indicated earlier, the role of the ward councillor can be described as a "boundary spanner" (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey 2013) between community members and local government. Community perceptions of councillors and local municipalities, regardless of their accuracy, must remain the subject of ongoing dialogue and should not be ignored, even if it includes dissent. Robust, and even conflict-ridden, discourse often leads to new self-organising networks and decisions, and can encourage novel ways of problem solving (Ströh 2007; Overton-de Klerk & Oelofse 2010). Ward councillors would be well served if they engineered a shift in their role from managers to facilitators of channels and multiple fora for discourse and free participation of community stakeholder involving informal opinion leaders, such as peer or civic leaders (Overton-de Klerk & Oelofse 2010; Deetz 1995).

CONCLUSION

This study is limited as it only presents a cameo of the perceptions of community members of their ward councillor in a particular area in time. Neither did it include the perceptions of ward councillors and other municipal employees in the research. Nonetheless, some of the findings strongly support the findings of earlier research conducted in poor or volatile communities, confirming a pattern. At the same time it should be noted that the findings point to some serious social ills and other systemic and endemic issues, such as corruption and lack of governance on the part of ward councillors, which would require further investigation and concerted intervention of local and national government.

Continued research on how communication is experienced by key stakeholders in communities is not only necessary, but also essential in a climate where service delivery protests are escalating dangerously. This research should also explore the perceptions of ward councillors, municipal employees, as well as other informal leaders. Such research could potentially facilitate a comparative and more complete picture on the value of adopting strategic communication principles and entrenching a leadership culture of listening, particularly in those areas where community members feel unheard and forgotten.

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