

# Implementing e-participation platforms to enhance citizen engagement and participation within South African municipalities

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*Abstract: The success of e-participation initiatives across South African municipalities hinges upon a nuanced comprehension and roles of the complex interplay between political, social, and technological factors. With the aid of an in-depth literature review, this study explores e-participation initiatives and their progress in strengthening the governance of South African municipalities. Using the content analysis technique, this study reveals that there is a serious lack of digital infrastructure and that digital gaps and lack of proper research addressing these problems between urban and rural municipalities contribute to inadequate Information and Communication Technology (ICT) strategies to improve citizen engagement and participation in governance processes. From this perspective, this study recommends an urgent need to undertake deliberate awareness campaigns to promote the use of e-participation platforms; and identify the citizens' needs and concerns to formulate locally preferred content and design inclusive policies to strengthen the order of local governance.*

*Keywords: Citizen participation, Digital divide, E-participation, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Participatory governance, Public sphere*

## 1. Introduction

South Africa gained its democratic momentum after the 1994 general election with a constitutional framework emphasising public participation, accountability, and transparency of public affairs (Govender et al., 2011). Since then, the government has functioned on a three-tier system, namely, national government responsible for policy-making, coordination, and oversight; Provincial government tasked with the responsibility of designing ordinances, service delivery and development within the provincial sphere; Local government comprising municipalities responsible for service delivery and Local Economic Development (LED) within their area of jurisdiction (South African Government, 2024). From the era of the apartheid regime until the advent of the democratic dispensation, the government remained characterised by harsh discrimination and limited citizen

engagement and participation (South African Government, 2024). The introduction of democratic reforms and local government elections post-1994 enabled the government to focus on reimagining and rebuilding a transformative public administration through public and private institutions to facilitate citizen engagement and participation (South African Government, 2024).

Although the government has made significant progress in citizen participation, fostering transparency and promoting accountability, South Africa struggles to maintain its citizen participation within the digitally enabled society depending on digital platforms for constant interaction (Molobela, 2023). In 2004, the Former Deputy President, Mr. Thabo Mbeki at the time, made a compelling statement concerning the country's commitment to adopt the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) to enhance public sector efficiency at the Berlin Conference on ICT for Development in his own words he stated (Mbeki, 2004):

“The digital revolution offers us a historic opportunity to leapfrog the various stages of development and to become full participants in the global information society. However, we must ensure that all share the benefits of this revolution and that the digital divide does not become another form of exclusion and marginalisation”.

The statement above signifies four aspects, namely but not limited to (1) adequate investment in ICT infrastructure; (2) developing local government content and skills and building human capacity; (3) promoting public-private partnerships, and (4) addressing the digital divide and ensuring absolute inclusivity for the scattered citizens. The emphasis is on the potential of ICT to drive the development and transformation of South Africa. Hence, there is a need for collective action to promote citizen participation through the benefits of ICT in maintaining government-citizen interaction.

The emergence of electronic government (e-government) initiatives started in the early 2000s in South Africa with much focus on improving service delivery and government efficiency (Pillay, 2012). By the mid-2000s, there was a growing interest in electronic participation (e-participation) through what is commonly known as pilot projects and research initiatives (Bawack et al., 2018). From 2010 onward, social media and digital platforms have increased adoption and application for citizen engagement (Bawack et al., 2018).

E-participation has gained momentum in recent years through various initiatives to enhance citizen engagement and participation in governance (Bawack et al., 2018). For instance, the 2010 Mzalendo initiative aimed at the Parliamentary Monitoring system to allow citizens of Kenya to engage and track Members' of Parliament (MPs) activities, contact information, and voting records helped increase some level of transparency and accountability (Sakawa, 2022). The South African National AIDS Council's (SANAC) e-Consultation Platform, launched in 2017, is another initiative that aimed to facilitate online discussions on policies and strategies relating to HIV/AIDS, which is recorded to have improved public participation (SANAC, 2024). In addition, the Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) e-participation Platform (privately developed GovChat application) is one of the most recent digital engagement tools designed to enhance citizen participation in policy-making and as a way to provide feedback on service delivery requests and complaints within municipalities (Plantinga et al., 2024).

Based on the initiatives above, e-participation refers to using and applying ICT to enable and enhance citizen participation in decision-making, public policy processes, and overall governance (Maleka & Moeti, 2021). In its truest sense, e-participation involves using digital or online tools and platforms designed to perform and facilitate collaboration and deliberate engagement between the government, the private sector, and the citizens (Pillay, 2012). From this perspective, e-participation may be through online consultations and surveys, social media engagement, online forums and discussion boards, electronic voting (e-voting), online public meetings, online petitioning and campaigning, and virtual town hall meetings (mostly dominated by the City of Tshwane, eThekweni, City of Johannesburg) and webinars amongst others. E-participation aims to increase citizen engagement and participation, enhance transparency and accountability, and inclusive development planning in local governance (Dywili & Draair, 2019:256). Through e-participation, there can be great support to make informed decisions and sound Integrated Development Plan (IDP) and policies whilst fostering deliberate collaboration and participation, which tend to build public trust and confidence in local government (Dywili & Draair, 2019:257).

Although e-participation initiatives offer beneficial factors to improve governance, South African municipalities continue to face several challenges that signify the need for enhanced e-participation implementation and improved governance (Plantinga et al., 2024). The widespread service delivery protests against corruption, lack of accountability, and poor service delivery suggest that some municipalities are struggling to fulfil their constitutional obligation. It is against this background to argue that limited socio-economic opportunities may hinder citizen engagement and participation in decision-making processes due to poor, inadequate ICT infrastructure and skilled personnel to implement e-participation initiatives effectively across rural municipalities. Therefore, this study generates the following research questions within the South African context:

- How can municipalities address the digital divide and foster equal access to e-participation platforms?
- What infrastructure upgrades are needed to support reliable and secure e-participation platforms?
- What are the challenges and benefits of implementing e-participation platforms?

## 2. Problem statement

Despite the potential of e-participation to foster and enhance citizen engagement and participation, accountability, and transparency in local governance, the implementation of e-participation initiatives seems to be hindered by a multi-faceted and complex interplay of institutional, technological, political and socio-economic factors (Maleka & Moeti, 2021; Okeke-Uzodike & Dlamini, 2019). Amongst others, these factors include but are not limited to (1) inadequate human and financial resources to implement e-participation initiatives, (2) the digital divide and (3) resistance to change from traditional participation platforms to online channels to reach all the scattered citizens (Dywili & Draair, 2019; United Nations, 2024). In turn, this spiral into limited citizen engagement and participation in public affairs, unequal access, and inadequate integration with existing participatory structures, thereby undermining the ability of municipalities to reach the transformative potential of digital democracy through effective implementation of e-participation

initiatives (Maleka & Moeti, 2021). Hence, this often perpetuates the power dynamics and social inequalities in some South African municipalities (Sibanda & Lues, 2021). Therefore, this study adopts the Public Sphere theory supported by the Theory of Communicative Action and Participatory Governance theory to explain the importance of investing in digital infrastructure towards implementing and using e-participation to foster citizen engagement and participation. The study further highlights the global perspective to paint a picture of e-participation, some of the initiatives undertaken across South Africa, and their common benefits and challenges associated with implementing e-participation platforms in municipalities.

### **3. Methodology**

This study employed the qualitative research method, specifically focusing on an in-depth literature review. The literature review focused on research materials, including but not limited to e-government, e-governance, public participation, e-participation, digital infrastructure, digital citizenship, digital governance, ICT, citizen engagement and participation, and other related research materials. These research materials were drawn from databases, including EBSCOhost, Research Gate, Google Scholar, Web of Science, Semantic Scholar, World Cat, and ProQuest. Using the content analysis technique, data in concepts, views, arguments, statements, patterns, and quotes was interpreted and presented in a textual format. The findings and discussions contained therein were generated from existing data to make meaningful conclusions on implementing e-participation platforms to strengthen South African municipalities' governance.

## **4. Literature review**

### **4.1. Theoretical framework**

There are several theories underpinning e-participation, namely but not limited to Deliberative Democracy theory, which emphasises the fundamentals of citizen deliberate participation in public policy-making processes; Public Sphere theory, which emphasises and conceptualises e-participation as one of its main digital public spheres to allow citizens to engage and participate in rational-critical debates; e-Government theory, which advocates for the use of ICT to improve accountability, transparency, and responsiveness; and Participatory Governance theory amongst others, which highlights the crucial importance of ensuring and promoting equal opportunities for representation and participation within government (van Est & Brom, 2012). The Public Sphere and Participatory Governance theories are selected for this study based on their connection to e-participation and governance.

The substantial works of German sociologist Jürgen Habermas on Public Sphere theory became well-established when he stated: "By public sphere, we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed" (Adut, 2012:239). Habermas meant that access to the public sphere was to become open as a principle to all citizens. From this perspective, citizens ought to act as a public in the event of dealing with matters of general interest without being subject

to coercion. To support this, Habermas's (1989) "The Transformation of the Public Sphere" demonstrate the historical trajectory of the phenomenon from the eighteenth century from salons (France), coffeehouses (England), and table societies (Germany) as places where aristocrats and members of the middle class gathered to discuss politics and art. For instance, authority supplanted the authority title in these meetings, whilst social status remained disregarded. The development of mass media led to public affairs accessible through newspapers, for instance to individuals scattered across space. This meant widespread and informed participation. In addition, the works of Oliver and Myers (1999:38) highlight that the public sphere is perceived as an "abstract space in which citizens discuss and debate public matters." In this sense, the emphasis focuses on discursive civiness amongst citizens in public spaces (see Emirbayer & Sheller, 1999; Somers, 1993).

Habermas's works have been criticised; for instance, Calhoun (1992) pointed out that Habermas' inability to exclude identities from the public sphere disregards the efforts and commitment of the opinions formed in the course of public debates (e.g. this is due to disregarding social statuses entirely). Nevertheless, the criticisms of Habermas' work share the same paradigm characterised by normative and idealistic elements: (1) the widespread and informed participation; (2) the condition of civility or civiness; (3) the conflation of the public sphere with citizenship (see Adut, 2012:239-241). In the digital society, these three elements ought to be carefully analysed; for instance, citizens can interact with governments through digital platforms using Internet telephones and watch local television news or read a newspaper to stay informed about public affairs. Hence, the public sphere is considered beyond space, comprising all available communication channels through the government that ought to engage citizens and foster participation (Adut, 2012). In this sense, the government is expected to publish information, make it accessible and listen to the needs and expectations of the people to maintain deliberative democracy (Msenge & Nzewi, 2021). However, to ensure a lack of frustration through channels of communication in the public sphere, Habermas' (1981) "Theory of Communicative Action (TCA)" cannot be ignored nor overlooked.

Habermas's TCA posits that social action is two-fold: (1) instrumental action, meaning the public sphere should be goal-oriented with strategic action to achieve specific ends; (2) communicative action, meaning the public sphere ought to be oriented towards mutual understanding, cooperation, and consensus (Habermas, 1981). TCA informs deliberate democracy to allow citizens to engage in rational discourse, enabling the public sphere to function as a space for critical debate. In this manner, Habermas's TCA fosters (1) inclusivity, whereby all citizens have equal access to participate; (2) publicity, whereby there is open discussion and transparency; (3) rationality, whereby argumentation is based on reason and not necessarily on authority or tradition (Habermas, 1981). Therefore, the implementation of e-participation platforms across municipalities in South Africa carries the potential to maintain and foster citizen engagement and participation without being subject to coercion (e.g. financial threats, exploitation, abuse of authority, bureaucratic constraints) in matters of public interest if these theories can be carefully put into practice.

To promote good governance, Participatory Governance theory can be incorporated with Public Sphere theory to achieve satisfactory governance and public participation. Sherry Arnstein is known to have introduced the concept of participatory democracy in 1969 to emphasise the importance of citizen participation in government decision-making (Madumo, 2014:133). David Held developed

the idea of participatory governance in 1987 to strongly emphasise the importance of citizen involvement in governance. Archon Fung (2006) further boosted the Public Governance theory by focusing on collaborative governance and citizen participation (Fung, 2006:66-75). These scholars share similar interests in this regard: (1) they aim to increase citizen involvement and participation in government decision-making processes; (2) they emphasise the importance of improving accountability by holding government officials accountable to the public; (3) they highlight on enhanced government responsiveness to ensure that policies reflect the concerns, needs, and aspirations of the citizens; and (4) they advocate for better decision-making in order to incorporate diverse community views and further make informed government decisions (Fung, 2006; Madumo, 2014).

The relevance of the theories above is key for upholding the Constitutional mandate as the South African municipalities are expected to encourage citizen engagement and participation in municipal affairs (Section 152 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA Constitution), 1996:74). These theories can be used to design digital engagement platforms to facilitate citizen participation and the use social media platforms to enhance citizen-government interaction and information sharing (Tejedo-Romero et al., 2022). In turn, e-participation can increase opportunities for citizen involvement whilst promoting accountability, transparency, responsiveness, maintaining the rule of law, and granting citizens access to government information (Ganaga & Phahlane, 2024).

Although Public Sphere theory and Participatory Governance theory enhance citizen participation and governance, both theories are criticised for their unequal access to media, elitism, polarisation, and language barriers (van Est & Brom, 2012). For instance, the Public Sphere theory is often criticised for its dominance of educated and affluent citizens, whilst the voices of the poor and illiterate might remain marginalised (Gillward, 1993). In South Africa, the diverse languages often limit citizen participation; for instance, those who speak Xitsonga might be unable to participate in Afrikaans-speaking community-based initiatives. Furthermore, the Participatory Governance theory in South Africa is often criticised for tokenism because governance initiatives can be superficial and lack fruitful citizen influence (Katzef et al., 2022). This is often worsened by the theory's elite capture, whereby local elites often dominate municipal participatory processes whilst excluding the poor and marginalised voices (Katzef et al., 2022). Therefore, inclusive language policies, diverse media representation, meaningful citizen engagement and participation, capacity building and resource allocation, and robust monitoring and evaluation ought to be at the forefront of adopting these theories to ensure readiness and successful e-participation implementation, particularly within South African municipalities.

## 4.2. E-participation from a global perspective

Globally, e-participation has emerged as a vital tool to enhance citizen engagement and improve democratic processes across government institutions (Wirtz et al., 2018). From this perspective, the literature claims that e-participation can expedite citizen engagement and participation, particularly among marginalised groups (Wirtz et al., 2018). In support of this claim, Estonia's government's e-voting system, launched in 2005, has enabled citizens to participate in elections remotely, resulting in increased voter turnout (Tsahkna, 2013). In the 2023 parliamentary elections, Estonia's e-voting system has made tremendous progress by achieving a historic milestone, with more than half of the

total votes (51.1%) cast online (Baloglu et al., 2024). This solemnly demonstrates digital trust and the adoption of online voting amongst the citizens of Estonia.

Based on the global scale, it is crucial to clarify the concept of e-participation. E-participation is commonly known as the supreme term for e-democracy, and it refers to the adoption of digital media for governments to enhance the interaction between public administration and citizens and improve democratic processes (United Nations, 2018). On the other hand, e-democracy refers to using ICTs to support decision-making processes (Macintosh, 2004). Given the Estonia case study, e-Democracy consists of two subclasses, namely (1) e-voting and (2) e-participation. Additionally, Macintosh (2004:10) highlights that e-participation comprises three main components, namely (1) e-information, (2) e-consultation, and (3) e-decision-making. These components are further explained in the ensuing section. In connection to these components, the United Nations (2018) defines e-participation as "providing citizens with more e-information for decision-making, promoting e-consultation for participation and deliberation processes, and strengthening e-decision making by enhancing citizen input".

Recently, there has been a growing trend of implementing government initiatives to adopt social networks as a media for government-citizen engagement and communication (Effing et al., 2011). Social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube and TikTok remain widely adopted and considered more efficient, effective, and practical in enhancing citizen-government interaction. Literature shows that user-generated content on social media platforms seriously impacts citizens' perspectives in forming political opinions (Kushwaha et al., 2022). In most cases, social media platforms offer low-cost and real-time multimedia information dissemination whilst supporting government efforts to increase transparency and accountability. In support of this, Hubert, Estevez, Maguitman and Janowski (2018) studied citizen-government interaction, specifically Twitter (X) for Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Uruguay, five Latin American nations and Argentina with mature e-participation, using emotion analysis. The findings of their study reveal neutral tweets, followed by tweets with positive sentiments, whilst tweets with negative sentiments were shown last by citizens.

Although social media platforms and other government websites prove to be more efficient, effective, and practical, some governments still grapple, whilst some governments appear to be advancing with desirable online presence, which in turn often affects the number of citizens taking part in decision-making processes (Hubert et al., 2018). The e-participation index further confirms this for all nations, as the United Nations researchers conducted. For instance, the e-participation index for 2024 shows Denmark with (0.9863) and ranks 2 out of 193 countries in the world; on the other hand, both Singapore and Estonia rank 7 (0.9589), and the United States of America rank 11 of 193 countries (United Nations, 2024). In Africa, South Africa demonstrates its regional lead with a rank of 29 (0.8356) of 193 as opposed to the rank of 61, as shown in the 2022 e-participation index (United Nations, 2024). This suggests that South Africa has enhanced its e-participation presence across African states thus far.

Despite significant improvement shown by the United Nations e-participation Index (2024), African countries, including South Africa, continue to be confronted with issues, namely but not lim-

ited to the digital divide, inadequate digital/ICT infrastructure, digital trust, and budgetary constraints to implement e-participation projects, particularly across municipalities (Okeke-Uzodike & Dlamini, 2019). This signifies the need for additional funding and critical expertise to ensure effective e-participation implementation to enhance democratic processes in the local government.

#### **4.3. Digital infrastructure and digital divide associated with e-participation in South African municipalities**

Digital infrastructure comprises physical and virtual components designed to enable the use, storage, processing, transmission or transmitting, and exchanging of digital information (Drechsler et al., 2022). In light of this, physical, digital infrastructure can include but is not limited to fibre-optic cables; data centres; servers; routers and switches; cell towers and mobile networks; network exchange points (LAN et al.); and cloud infrastructure (computing, storage) (Drechsler et al., 2022). Virtual components or intangible infrastructure include, amongst others, database management system; operating system (e.g. Windows, Linux, macOS); software applications; cloud services (Paas, SaaS); cybersecurity measures (firewalls, encryption); data analytics and management tools; Internet of things (IoT) and Artificial Intelligence and machine learning platforms (Toczyłowski, 2023). In addition, the digital divide refers to the disparities in access to ICT infrastructure (e.g. digital infrastructure) amongst various communities, socio-economic groups, and their geographical areas (rural and urban).

In understanding the context of digital infrastructure in South African municipalities, many studies have created a confusing space for pinpointing the needed digital infrastructure for municipalities. For instance, a study by Mohale (2024), "The role of e-government in the promotion of municipal service delivery in South Africa", claims to have studied how e-Government can enhance municipal service delivery; hence, when reviewing the study, it is clear that it emphasised much on the benefits and challenges of e-Government with a poor demonstration on the role of e-Government. Perhaps Mohale (2024) attempted to address the benefits and challenges of e-government across municipalities. If Mohale tried to put more effort into studying the role of e-government in promoting municipal service delivery, one would have picked up various digital infrastructures used or needed by some municipalities to render services online.

Another study by Galushi and Malatji (2022), "Digital Public Administration and Inclusive Governance at the South African Local Government, in-depth analysis of e-Government and Service Delivery in Musina Local Municipality", attempted to address issues of e-government, e-participation, and, most importantly, digital public administration. However, Galushi and Malatji (2022) seem to have missed the importance of clearly distinguishing between the digital infrastructure required to implement the three (e-government, e-participation, and digital public administration). For instance, the authors emphasise on the municipality in question that there is a lack of ICT infrastructure, and skills without coining the actual ICT infrastructure and skills needed within the municipality. The fallacy of similar issues found in existing literature often leads to problems of failing to identify the hidden patterns of digital infrastructure and digital gaps within investigated municipalities in South Africa. Indicating that a municipality is affected by inadequate ICT infrastructure,

for example, without coining the needed ICT infrastructure, does not necessarily help researchers or municipalities reimagine and redesign budgets and specific solutions to address these matters.

Few researchers seem to be able to coin the actual digital infrastructural and digital divide problems affecting municipalities. For instance, Nel-Sanders and Malomane (2022) emphasise that municipal information is often not secure or stored in a protected database. As defined, digital infrastructure includes data centre and database management systems, meaning any municipality ought to be equipped with skilled personnel to ensure that data remains safely stored and protected at data centres and database management systems. Nel-Sanders and Malomane (2022) further show that there are poor mechanisms in place to enable the transmission of data within local government, which exacerbates the digital divide. Hence, the move from manual paper-based systems and traditional approaches like Imbizos is still embraced by technological advancements (e.g. mobile and e-participation platforms) (Nel-Sanders & Malomane, 2022).

Based on the discussion above, there is a need to address the digital divide and foster equal access to e-participation platforms through infrastructural upgrades to build a secure and reliable e-participation platform. In efforts to invest in digital infrastructure and build a reliable and secure e-participation platform, a study conducted by Molobela (2023), "Assessing the e-readiness of e-government implementation in South African municipalities", shows the commitment of several municipalities (City of Mbombela, Makhado Local Municipality, Winelands District Municipality, and West Coast District Municipality) in addressing and upgrading their digital infrastructure. For instance, Makhado Local Municipality has outsourced its ICT operations to address end-user equipment (e.g. server rooms and network system); the City of Mbombela have built a secure and reliable Information Technology (IT) sub-division to transform the municipality into a smart city; and the Cape Winelands District Municipality has one of the most effective ICT system support designed to foster e-participation and enhance local governance processes amongst rural communities to bridge the digital gap (Molobela, 2023:149-150). From this point of view, the following infrastructural upgrades may be considered. Building secure and reliable e-participation platforms requires upgrading municipal digital infrastructure. This includes but is not limited to investment in:

- (1) Broadband fibre roll-outs in order to ensure high-speed Internet connectivity;
- (2) Data centre infrastructure and private cloud solutions as a way to securely manage and host e-participation meetings;
- (3) Municipalities should re-think their investment by developing and maintaining user-friendly, accessible and secure e-participation platforms;
- (4) All municipalities should form part of the e-participation and Policy Modelling Platform for South Africa (ePPMOSA) - this project is key towards its aim to pilot e-participation and policy modelling technologies in several municipalities and
- (5) Municipalities should invest and implement end-to-end encryption, incident response, and regular security audits to ensure e-participation platform security.

(6) Municipalities should address the digital gap by ensuring citizens have equal access to e-participation platforms. This includes establishing accessible ICT devices and public Wi-Fi networks and not neglecting the need for digital literacy and programs.

#### 4.4. Conceptualising and contextualising e-participation platforms in governance

The concept of e-participation emerged in the late 1990s and became popular in the early 2000s as the implosion of the Internet and digital technologies dominated business and government (Bawack et al., 2018). The digital revolution brought about widespread adoption of the Internet, digital devices and social media platforms, enabling society to adopt new forms of interaction, communication and participation (Plantinga et al., 2024). To uphold democracy and promote citizen engagement, governments had to increase citizen participation through digital platforms to ensure accountability and transparency in governance (Maleka & Moeti, 2021). From this point of view, governance meant exploring digital platforms to enhance citizen participation and restore local governance (Bawack et al., 2018).

The first country to make huge investments in e-participation was a small Baltic nation in Northern Europe, known as "Estonia", in the early 1990s (Tsahkna, 2013). After gaining independence from the Soviet Union, Estonia started to explore digital governance and e-participation (Tsahkna, 2013). For instance, in 1995, the country launched its National Strategy for Information Society Development; in 2000, it further introduced digital Identity Document (ID) cards for its citizens; and between 2005 and 2007, Estonia launched its first e-Cabinet (a digital platform designed to enhance government decision-making, and the e-participation portal) allowing citizens to become co-producers of public policy (Tsahkna, 2013). Singapore invested in ICT and digital technologies to enhance service delivery, citizen participation and governance through e-participation and e-engagement platforms launched in the early 2000s. The United States government during the Obama Administration launched the "Open Government Partnership (OGP)" aimed at enhancing citizen engagement and participation and fostering transparency and openness amongst key role players and citizens (Piotrowski, 2017). The OGP became a significant initiative in Africa, including in South Africa, whereby initiatives like South African Revenue Services (SARS) e-filing, e-Tender Publication portal by the National Treasury, and e-Home Affairs services were established to facilitate and improve online interaction between the government and citizens ((Masinde & Mkhonto, 2019). The e-Government Strategy and Roadmap launched in 2016 by the Cabinet supports more investment and the use of ICTs in rendering basic services (Masinde & Mkhonto, 2019). Despite these initiatives and investments in support of online services and e-participation, socio-economic factors such as income inequality, poverty, geographic location barriers between urban and rural areas, limited access to information and education, particularly within the local government, have affected and decreased civic engagement and participation (Masinde & Mkhonto, 2019). The lack of digital literacy programs has affected marginalised groups more acutely than others (Masinde & Mkhonto, 2019). For instance, 71% of urban South Africans have Internet access than 24% of rural citizens (Statistics et al., 2020), which means the marginalised groups face the challenge of being deprived of interacting with the government or form part of any decision-making process initiated through e-participation channels.

The exploration of digital technologies and their potential to facilitate citizen participation by developing e-participation frameworks and concepts continues boosting public sector governance (Nzimakwe, 2018:117). By 1999, the first international conference on “e-democracy” was hosted in South Korea in Seoul (Kim, 2017). The United Nations followed this in 2001 by launching the “e-participation Initiative” to promote using and applying digital technologies to govern the public sector. In 2003, the European Union launched yet another “e-participation” project to exploit digital participation platforms in Europe and improve decision-making processes (Kim, 2017). South Africa hosted its first “e-participation conference,” held in Cape Town in 2004 (Western Cape Government, 2005). After this conference, for instance, the City of Cape Town established the Public Participation Unit to facilitate citizen engagement and participation in a contributory way towards the budget allocation process. The City of Cape Town implemented mobile, web and social media platforms for citizens to interact, engage, participate, and receive messages/notifications from the C3 system, which requires citizens to register online to alert citizens via SMS and emails about municipal events and activities (Bagui, 2013:102). Despite this progress within the City of Cape Town, numerous municipalities across South Africa continue to lag in following similar footsteps partly due to inadequate funds, lack of political direction, poor ICT infrastructure, and capable ICT personnel, amongst others (Okeke-Uzodike & Dlamini, 2019).

The main theme of the e-participation in Africa conference held in 2004 in Cape Town aimed at enhancing citizen engagement and participation in governance through the adoption and utilisation of ICTs (Western Cape Government, 2005). Using ICTs, the Western Cape government wanted to maintain digital democracy through digital consultations and establish strategies for advancing citizen participation in governance through ICTs (Western Cape Government, 2005). Mobile-based feedback mechanisms and online forums were considered the highest form of successful e-participation. However, unequal access to ICT infrastructure and digital illiteracy became an apparent challenge alongside the failure to design and accommodate local language content and culturally relevant platforms in the Western Cape and other provinces (Nzimakwe, 2018). For instance, the Batho Pele initiative launched in 1997 attempted to enhance service delivery through citizen-centred approaches (Nzimakwe, 2018). Although this initiative focused less on e-participation platforms, the government later acknowledged the importance of incorporating ICTs to enhance citizen engagement and participation, and policy feedback (Nzimakwe, 2018).

South Africa’s National Anti-Corruption Hotline, launched in September 2004 by the Public Service Commission (PSC) is another one of the e-participation initiatives aimed at enhancing online feedback mechanisms (PSC, 2006:3). The Hotline was upgraded to include online reporting facility, SMS reporting facility to boost online reporting, and with whistleblowing facility to allow citizen to anonymously report corruption between 2007, 2011, and 2016 respectively (South African Government News Agency, 2018). In addition, the South African National Treasury’s e-Treasury platform launched in 2007 is another e-participation platform influenced by the Batho Pele initiative thus far (PSC, 2007). In 2010 and 2012, the e-Treasury was upgraded to online budgeting and forecasting tools to accommodate both the provincial and local government in ensuring sound financing reporting (National Treasury, 2024). In 2015 e-treasury system was incorporated with the South African Revenue Service (SARS) to enhance revenue management; for instance, the e-filing system was integrated with the e-treasury system (National Treasury, 2024). In 2019, Artificial Intelligence and

Machine Learning were integrated into the e-Treasury system to enhance analytics and forecasting (National Treasury, 2024). These initiatives signify the importance of e-participation within the South African context to improve government transparency, accountability and efficiency.

Given the initiatives above, e-participation comprises various platforms. In its truest sense, it refers to using ICTs and digital technologies to establish and facilitate citizen engagement and participation in governance and decision-making processes (Pillay, 2012). Based on e-participation platforms, citizens can engage and interact with their government and public officials, provide feedback, and contribute towards policy-making. Different types of e-participation ought to be known, namely but not limited to the following (Aichholzer & Rose, 2020:93-140):

- E-Consultation platforms: this platform is designed to allow citizens to provide feedback on projects and public policy proposals. For instance, the e-Treasury platform is one platform that allow citizens to provide feedback on government budget proposals. Another example is Cape Town City's online consultation portal, where citizens can comment on municipal policies.

- E-Petition platforms: the role of this platform is to enable the public to create and sign any relevant online petition. The e-petition system by the South African Parliament is one platform that allows citizens to create and sign petitions made available online.

- E-Forum platforms: the e-Forum platform facilitates online discussions and debates mostly focusing on public policy issues. The e-Forum platform by the South African Government is one platform that allows the public to engage in such discussions and debates. The citizen engagement platform by the city of Johannesburg is another e-forum platform that allows citizens to engage in similar discussions and debates.

- E-voting platforms: the groundwork for e-voting platforms in South Africa has been a great initiative; however, the government, allowing citizens to continue voting at physical voting stations, has rejected it.

- E-Engagement platforms: this platform offers a wide range of engagement tools, including but not limited to polls, surveys and gamification. For instance, Gauteng Province's e-engagement platform is known for using surveys and gamification to engage its citizens. The Western Cape Government's e-participation platforms use surveys and polls to enhance citizen participation in governance.

The platforms above demonstrate the commitment and potential of e-participation platforms in enhancing citizen engagement and participatory spirit in the governance of the South African government, particularly municipalities.

## **5. Challenges associated with e-participation in South African municipalities**

There are similar patterns or challenges concerning e-participation and the overall governance within South African municipalities in urban or rural areas. These patterns or challenges may be categorised and discussed as follows:

### 5.1. Digital divide

Amongst others, the dimensions of the digital affect South African municipalities in different ways; for instance, the access divide worsens unequal access to ICT infrastructure due to poor facilities that provide computers, Internet, and Wi-Fi connection to the marginalised communities (Masinde & Mkhonto, 2019). In addition, the disparities in digital literacy and skills deprive some communities of repeat socio-economic opportunities (e.g. employment, education, health, bursaries) presented by e-government, e-participation, and other digital technologies; hence, the overall problem leads to a disengaged or reduced civic engagement causing limited participation in digital civic activities (Masinde & Mkhonto, 2019).

The digital divide may be twofold; first, municipalities like the City of Cape Town or Johannesburg can implement e-participation platforms effectively. Second, although they can implement, due to the digital divide, only the educated and those with access to Internet/Wi-Fi, smartphones, and personal computers can repeatedly engage and participate in online municipal discussions and meetings. This means that ordinary citizens without access to the Internet, computers or even smartphones face the challenge of being excluded from their municipality's decision-making processes. The digital divide further affects rural municipalities drastically, like the Bushbuckridge Local Municipality (BLM) in the rural parts of the Mpumalanga province, whereby the municipality is confronted with limited ICT infrastructure and inadequate Internet connection, computers and lacks other digital platforms designed to enhance citizen engagement and participation (Molobela, 2023). From this point of view, the digital divide is further aggravated by the lack of e-participation committees to track the progress of citizen engagement and participation on digital platforms (Ganaga & Phahlane, 2024).

### 5.2. Awareness and digital literacy

Digital awareness and literacy are associated with the ability of government officials, citizens, business owners and their customers to use ICTs to effectively access government service opportunities and information online (National Treasury, 2024). This means that people should understand the benefits and risks of utilising digital technologies. It is the responsibility of the government, in partnership with authorised parties to avail knowledge of existing digital services and platforms in government (National Treasury, 2024). Digital literacy means that people should be educated, trained and equipped with basic skills to use devices, browse and interact with their government, perform online transactions, and know how to spot and verify government content against misinformation (Bagui, 2013).

Although South African municipalities should be reaping the benefits of e-participation, they are not exempted from experiencing patterns of lack of awareness and the poverty of digital literacy in their communities. For instance, many City of Cape Town citizens lacked awareness when the GovChat platform was launched, signifying that only a few were aware (Katzef et al., 2022). Another connection is that only citizens with higher digital literacy skills are more likely to access e-participation platforms than citizens facing technological challenges (Katzef et al., 2022). Hence, most citizens still need intensive training and education on e-participation platforms to improve their usage and enhance public participation in municipal decision-making processes.

### **5.3. Resistance to change and adapt to the digitally enabled society**

Resistance to change from traditional to digital platforms remains a huge hindrance for South African municipalities to embrace e-participation platforms. Amongst others, Ganga and Phahlane (2024) reveal that the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality (BCMM) still invest heavily in Imbizo face-to-face meetings and stakeholder consultations, even though citizens have raised concerns that such consultations and meetings are convened during working hours and that the working class are being excluded from active participation and engagement within the municipality. This signifies that there is an urgent need to integrate traditional participation platforms with existing digital platforms to cater for all the scattered citizens from different municipal areas.

### **5.4. E-participation strategies in enhancing municipal governance**

Ganga and Phahlane (2024) report that municipalities such as the BCMM still fail to design an e-participation policy framework that can be used to track the vision and progress of implementing e-participation platforms to enhance governance. Molobela (2023) further reveals the same problem with BLM, indicating that the municipality lacks a sound e-participation strategy, which often hinders the ability of the municipality to enhance citizens' engagement and participation to transform the local governance processes.

### **5.5. Digital trust**

Significant progress has been made towards implementing e-participation platforms in some municipalities (e.g. City of Cape Town, eThekwini municipality). However, citizens still doubt trusting the Internet with their data, including but not limited to Identity Document (ID) numbers, contact details, home addresses and banking details due to cybercrimes in South Africa (Katzef et al., 2022). Molobela (2023) argues that some South African municipalities (e.g. BLM) remain vulnerable and lag behind while partly failing to ensure that citizens' personal details are secure and protected against digital fraud.

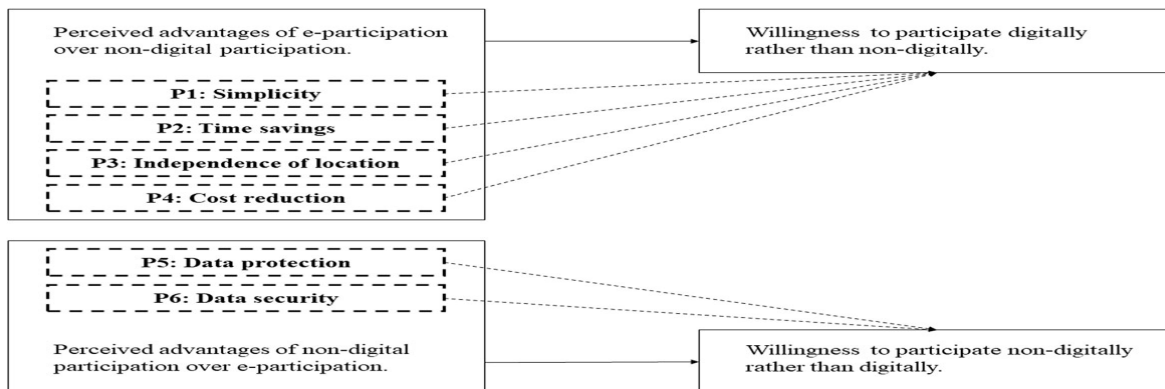
## **6. Benefits of e-participation over non-participation**

The benefits of e-participation platforms are more focused on fostering citizen engagement and participation openly and transparently to ensure participatory governance through ICTs (Aichholzer & Rose, 2020). In South Africa, growing evidence points towards the expansion of e-participation platforms for strengthening governance structures and collaboration amongst government departments, municipalities and citizens (Maleka & Moeti, 2021). E-participation aims to enhance access to public services and information, improve participation in policy-making processes, and empower citizens and society to become active stakeholders in public affairs (Maleka & Moeti, 2021).

A recent study by Mertes, Fischer, Brüesch and Andermatt (2022:135-136) shows that the common benefits of e-participation platforms are associated with simplicity, time savings, location independence, and cost reduction. The willingness to participate digitally is mostly related to these benefits

over others; for instance increases citizen engagement and participation, improves service delivery, enhances government efficiency, offers valuable data to reach informed decisions, improves transparency and accountability, and empowerment of marginalised communities to name a few (Merters et al., 2022). This may suggest that citizens desire simplicity to save time wherever they are located and that there are minimum costs incurred to participate, as shown in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Perceived benefits of e-participation



Source: Merters et al. (2022)

Figure 1 shows that simplicity in e-participation platforms means easy registration and login; for instance, the City of Cape Town's online consultation system requires simple registration information (City of Cape Town, 2024). From a simplicity perspective, e-participation platforms provide simple language and clear instruction; the Western Cape Government's e-participation system offers systematic guides in plain language (Western Cape Government, 2012). Mobile-friendliness is another simplicity of e-participation platforms; the City of Johannesburg and Western Cape Government's e-participation platform allows citizens to access it using mobile devices (Western Cape Government, 2012). Multilingual support is another form of the simplicity of the e-participation platform; for instance, the City of Cape Town offers support for more than one language of interaction on their platform (City of Cape Town, 2024).

In the context of time savings, e-participation platforms offer 24/7 accessibility to allow citizens to participate at their convenience, and it reduces the requirement for physical visits to public offices and travel time (Merters et al., 2022). Quick registration and login, streamlined feedback, automated notifications and rapid access to information on e-participation platforms also save citizens time, and citizens can further track their participation and engagement on e-participation platforms as long as such a platform offers simplified tracking of participation (Merters et al., 2022).

The essence of e-participation platforms automatically allows citizens to participate in decision-making processes anywhere and at any time without visiting government premises (Aichholzer & Rose, 2020). Aichholzer and Rose (2020) highlight that rural communities and people with disability can benefit from e-participation platforms. This could ensure inclusivity and equal participation through mobile accessibility (Aichholzer & Rose, 2020). Again, the issue of location-independent feedback can be addressed online. Lastly, e-participation platforms are less costly, as they offer lower

printing and distribution costs, marketing and advertising costs, less human resource costs, and minimise travelling costs for citizens as they enable remote participation. However, it is worth noting that data security and data protection remain a huge challenge for e-participation. Hence some people would rate non-digital platforms high in maintaining data trust (Merters et al., 2022).

## 7. Results and discussions

There are mixed results concerning the success of e-participation initiatives or platforms across South African municipalities. For the most part, Mongae (2024) reveal that one of the most common factors hindering the success of e-participation remains the digital gap between urban and rural municipalities. Borrowing from the works of Mphidi, Moloto and Muchie (2023) reveals that lack of upgraded digital infrastructure and inadequate ICT investment continue to cause unequal access to the Internet and digital services (e.g. e-participation platforms), particularly across rural municipalities. Moloto and Munchie (2023) highlight that the digital divide is worsened by the high cost of Internet services and the failure of the government to regulate the prices of data or cost of Internet access to accommodate low-income citizens to be able to afford mobile data to access online services, including e-participation platforms. For instance, 7.5 million low-income citizens in South Africa pay 80 times more when compared with middle- and upper-class citizens for internet access, which widens the digital gap between urban and rural municipalities (Global Citizen, 2021). From this point of view, access to hardware (smartphones, computers, libraries, Internet/Wi-Fi access), income inequality, unemployment, digital illiteracy and awareness are found to be the leading factors hurting the success of e-Platformation platforms across municipalities (Global Citizen, 2021).

Amongst other municipalities, there seems to be a recognised success of e-participation platforms. For instance, the City of Johannesburg has recently implemented the "Joburg Connect" platform to enable citizens to engage and make complaints, comment, offer suggestions via phone and view their municipal account balances online (Mongae, 2024). However, digital transformation appears transactional in that digital transactions show progress more than online citizen engagement and participation in municipal by-laws and other matters of community interest, like creating online employment and providing accurate information to ensure fair online participation (Molobela, 2023).

The City of Tshwane, through Tshwane platforms often host virtual town hall meetings to enable residents' engagement on municipal issues (Mongae, 2024). Mongae (2024) reveals that many residents often experience little and poor feedback when making inputs online due to inadequate ICT infrastructure and unreliable internet connection. This suggests that, although the municipality can host virtual meetings, it is still necessary to cater for those residents who prefer traditional engagements, and further provide physical feedback to make them feel significant. When citizens share a sense of significance it creates better conditions to boost public trust.

Another municipality is the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality (BCMM), which recently launched an e-government portal designed to enable residents to check service delivery statuses, make applications and receive municipal announcements. Using the case study of BCMM, Genaga and Phahlane (2024:6) reveal that the municipality has no open government strategy, whilst they

frequently use the Imbizo platform to consult stakeholders through face-to-face meetings despite digital participation platforms to simplify citizens' involvement. The BCMM only utilises social media for unstructured communication relating to water or electricity outages. Ganga and Phahlane (2024:9) further reveal that BCMM has no designated committee assigned to focus on and observe the execution of e-participation platforms, hence less online participation. Although some information may be accessed on the website of the BCMM, Imbizo remains the most utilised offline platform; citizens have raised concerns that such meetings and consultations are conducted during office hours while others are at work and therefore, they feel neglected and that their voice does not necessarily matter into municipality's decision-making processes (Ganaga & Phahlane, 2024:8).

In 2022, a study titled "Factors Affecting Citizens' Use of e-participation Platforms: A Case of GovChat Platform in Cape Town Municipality" revealed that there is low usage of e-participation platforms by citizens due to environmental, social, and personal factors (Katzef et al., 2022:69). From this point of view, citizens in the City of Cape Town were not aware of the GovChat platform, which suggest that the municipality needed to enhance their marketing and promotion strategies to attract citizens to be aware of the platform (Katzef et al., 2022). The authors further reveal that only citizens with higher digital literacy skills were likely to use the GovChat, highlighting the need for further digital skills training. For instance, one of the respondents from their study mentioned, "I am not comfortable using a smartphone, so I do not use GovChat; another respondent mentioned that GovChat is simple to use, even for someone like me who is not tech-savvy" (Katzef et al., 2022).

A recent study titled "A Scoping Review for proposing an e-participation Framework for South African Local Municipalities, Mahwi, Phiri, Dlamini, Herselman and Meyer (2023) highlights that there is a bigger fish to fry as municipalities ought to acknowledge issues of value, trust, content for access, skills, and transparency to ensure effective implementation of e-participation platforms. Their study reports a dire need for a conducive environment to enable citizen engagement and participation in both online and offline participation platforms (Mahwi et al., 2023). Nkgapele (2024:1128) highlights that e-participation platforms have allowed citizens across municipalities to reap the benefits of active engagement and participation, which has improved decision-making, strengthened democracy, enhanced transparency, and accountability, and some municipalities have become more responsive to community needs. This illustrates that effective e-participation implementation can strengthen municipality relations with their constituents, which can hold them accountable for their actions and inactions against poor service delivery.

Applying the Government-to-Citizen approach, Mawela (2016) found that citizen engagement and participation in both provincial and municipal governments were experiencing a discrepancy in adopting social media platforms to enhance participation, particularly in metropolitan municipalities. Although citizens were willing to use social media to engage with their government, Mawela (2016) found citizens' responses sporadically due to unstructured communication. This suggests a poor online presence by citizens, and their lack of active engagement and participation to ensure their inputs and aspirations remain captured and included in municipal programs to improve service delivery.

Based on the presented literature findings, several aspects can be noted. First, South African municipalities are still grappling with chronic digital poverty, particularly when comparing rural and

urban areas (Mongae, 2024). Second, the digital divide is not only tied to unequal access to digital or ICT infrastructure; it is a lifestyle problem whereby it almost appears as if rural communities have disengaged from active municipal-community interactions through online platforms. This is further worsened by the country's high data connection prices, making it difficult even for those with smartphones to boost the online presence of e-participation platforms (Global Citizen, 2021). Third, although most urban municipalities (e.g. City of Cape Town, City of Joburg, City of Tshwane, BCMM) have implemented e-participation portals, there is still a challenge of getting active participation, and often some citizens are not unaware of the initiatives undertaken by these municipalities (Katzef et al., 2022). This remains challenging due to poor awareness of platforms designed to enhance municipal-community engagement and participation. Fourth, the lack of integrating traditional and digital participation platforms remains another challenge; for instance, the BCMM heavily relies on Imbizos for community participation, however, citizens have raised concerns that these meetings are convened during office hours while people are still at work. Hence, they should accommodate others through online platforms. Lastly, rural and urban municipal residents share the same problem of "feeling left out" of municipal affairs and important decision-making processes due to unstructured interaction and communication from their respective municipalities (Mawela, 2016). This is affected by the failure to use social media platforms to inform the public on time before hosting important community meetings.

## 8. Conclusion and recommendations

Despite the potential that the Internet carries to simplify life, communication, and participation for all scattered individuals and citizens worldwide, adopting e-participation in South Africa became one of the most efficient ways to foster citizen engagement and participation. Using e-participation platforms presents the country with the unique opportunity to engage citizens 24/7, and it carries the potential to foster transparency and accountability in government. However, with all of the benefits that e-participation platforms can offer, municipalities are lagging behind online community participation. Issues of inadequate digital infrastructure, ICT investment, digital skills and literacy have resulted in a chronic digital gap, particularly within rural communities. Although this study sought to unpack the global e-participation perspective, South African governments have not yet reached digital maturity in trusting e-participation platforms to reduce the burden and costs of traditional participation platforms. This has led to several scattered citizens feeling neglected, and their voices or inputs considered during decision-making processes claimed to be enhancing participatory governance.

There is yet another big fish to fry, considering the major difference and digital gap between rural and urban municipalities in adopting and implementing e-participation platforms. The high mobile data prices and poor access to public Wi-Fi across several municipalities remain persistent, and little seems to be accomplished, particularly in rural municipalities. Although budget constraints exist in these areas, it often poses a question of whether the lack of investment into digital infrastructure is an orchestrated ploy to keep some citizens out of touch with municipal affairs so that there can be less demand for transparency and accountability. However, progress is prevalent in several municipalities concerning the effective implementation of e-participation platforms (e.g. City of Tshwane,

the City of Joburg, the City of Cape Town, etc.). This suggests that there is still yet more work to be done in under-resourced and under-developed municipalities to implement e-participation to foster participation and enhance local governance processes.

This study addressed the benefits and challenges of e-participation platforms by emphasising which digital infrastructural upgrades can be adopted and invested in to address digital gaps in South African municipalities in implementing and maintaining effective e-participation platforms. Several initiatives were discussed from a global to South African perspective to track the progress of digital technologies and how e-participation platforms can be incorporated to enhance citizen engagement and participation. This study's discussion and literature findings demonstrate the local government's commitment to implementing e-participation platforms whilst indicating the challenges confronting several municipalities in implementing ICT plans to enhance online community participation. However, it is worth acknowledging that this study is limited within the context of the presented results and discussion. Hence, the following recommendations are made for this study:

- Regarding issues of the digital divide, municipalities need to conduct digital gap assessments to enable them to identify existing digital infrastructural and ICT skills gaps.
- About high prices of mobile data, each municipality with plans to maintain an e-participation platform with online citizen presence should partner with either Telkom, MTN, Vodacom, Rain and other network service providers to establish enough public Wi-Fi portals to reduce citizens' of the burden of data bundles or else they should make their e-participation platforms accessible by providing daily customer data bundles for those registered and paying municipal bills.
- The integration of social media platforms should be integrated with traditional methods of communication to cater for all the scattered community residents.
- Municipalities should prioritise e-participation awareness campaigns to identify whether citizens are interested and educated well about the use of e-participation platforms in order to improve digital content.

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### **Author Contribution**

[T.T] was involved in the structuring and writing of the introduction and background, theoretical framework; methodology; in-depth literature review; compiling secondary research resources; data curation, writing and review; data analysis; results and discussions; conclusion and recommendations.

The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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