



Communication of Community Related Matters to Enhance Service Delivery in a Rural Ulundi Municipality of South Africa

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Abstract

The dawn of democracy in South Africa since 1994 has witnessed numerous and violent service delivery protests from the African masses who were previously disenfranchised who expect better care from their legitimately elected government. The responsibility to provide basic services has been decentralized to enable a bottom-up approach to governance. The purpose of this paper is to examine the extent to which and depth of communication between communities and ward councillors together with the municipality members in a rural South Africa. The study used a questionnaire to gauge how the randomly selected sample of 116 community members from the population of Ulundi Municipality perceived the communication they received. Data analyses relied on the use of a statistical software and the study is descriptive. The findings revealed that the residents were familiar with their ward councilors and participated in ward meetings. However, the municipality was identified as not satisfactorily accessible to the constituents. This suggests that there should be measures put in place to improve communication at this level. More so because service delivery protests are often directed at councilors and municipalities as they are the ones legislated to provide services at the local sphere of government. Regular communication would allow the municipality to appraise communities about challenges they might experience in bringing about quality services to the community. Spheres of local government from different levels should coordinate their activities to reach all the communities.

Keywords: *Communication; Service Delivery; Rural Areas; Local Government*

Introduction

The end of the Apartheid era in South Africa in 1994 meant the end of the past oppressive legislations associated with colonialism that were designed to keep citizens of different races apart geographically, and economically (Greyling et al., 2015; Henrico & Fick 2019). Some of the notorious past legislations were the *Group Areas Act* (1950) and the *Natives Resettlement Act* (1954) through which

most citizens were moved to poorly serviced areas that were on the urban periphery and rural in nature. The race that was targeted by the past oppressive political system were mainly African people who were placed in areas that lacked basic services like water, proper housing, and electricity (Ngcobo & Mvuyana, 2022). Moreover, the system was such that Africans neither had a vote nor voice to raise their concerns about their bad treatment in those inhuman living conditions. The answer from the black citizenry were anti-government protests in which municipal property was damaged and those who purported to represent them as councilors were targeted (Netswera & Kgalane, 2014). Legislations at the time that claimed to allow the representation of Africans in their local government were the Urban Black Councils Act (Act 79 of 1961); Community Councils Act (Act 125 of 1977); Black Affairs Administration Act (Act 45 of 1971); Black Communities Development Act (Act 4 of 1984). However, the masses saw through these illegitimate representative legislations and continued to make the country ungovernable through protests.

The new democratic government of post 1994 aimed to rebuild good relations with the citizens by establishing accountable and representative local government structures in society (Mokhutso, Marumo & Motswaledi, 2023; Ntsebeza, 2005; Reddy, Sing & Moodley, 2003). These structures were designed to redress the past and contribute to social transformation grounded on equity and justice for all. Testimony to this commitment were mainly expressed in the Constitution, the ultimate legislation. In this respect, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), Section 153 (a) calls upon municipalities “to give priority to the basic needs of the community and to promote the social and economic development of the community” and ensure that there is adequate “involvement of communities and community organizations in the matters of local government.” Furthermore, section 195 (g) of the Constitution emphasises the importance of transparency and consultation in all the services that are provided by the state organs to ensure that the decisions taken are communicated to all affected stakeholders. The Constitution requires municipalities to engage the communities they serve by allowing them to have a voice in the administration of their areas through their political representatives who are ward councillors up to mayoral level. This task of providing basic services is delegated to municipalities because it is the sphere of government that is closer to communities and is therefore expected to provide better services (Mamokhere, Musitha & Netshidzivhani, 2022; Masuku & Jili, 2019). As a sphere of local government, municipalities are given this task because they are believed to be able to communicate better with citizens in their jurisdictions (Bhuiyan & Islam, 2023). This responsibility is further enshrined in the White Paper on Transforming Service delivery by the Department of Public Service and Administration (1997) as it states that provincial departments must identify ways in which they can improve public service delivery by putting people first (Department of Public Service and Administration, 1997). The emphasis of the eight *Batho Pele* (People First) principles in this White Paper is the role of consultation through which the views of the communities to be served are sourced. In other words, the government officials are expected to prioritise the people they serve by ensuring that communication with them is effective and the services they deliver are efficiently executed (Joel, 2022; Ngcobo & Roya, 2023; Zondo, 2022).

Other important pieces of legislation that support this position on public involvement include the Local Government: Municipal Systems Act 2000 (Act 32 of 2000) and Local Government: Municipal Structures Act 1998 (Act 117 of 1998) and many more such as provincial policies that are aligned to the national ones. On paper the available policies are impressive and raise hope of a better life for all citizens, especially the Africans who were previously marginalised in their own country. Yet, on the ground the situation looks dire.

Quality service is imperative in all sectors of society, be their private or public. Delivering a satisfying service ensures a good relationship between the customer and the service provider. In the public sector the services should focus on quality and efficiency that contributes to the transformation and improved quality of life for communities (Bhuiyan & Islam, 2023). Such services should address the needs and expectations of the citizens, especially the poor (Mina-Raiu & Melenciuc, 2022). However, violent service delivery protests in almost all South African municipalities, due to dissatisfaction with

slow and poor provision of basic services, have been on the rise since 2008 and remain unabated (du Plessis, 2023; Khambule, Nomdo & Siswana, 2019; Molefe & Manamele, 2021; Oupa, 2023). In some instances, these protests have led to the loss of lives and damages to private and public infrastructure that should benefit the community (Sethunya & Mlambo, 2022; Yende, 2023). The COVID 19 lockdown restrictions on movements did not restrain poor and vulnerable communities in informal settlements and rural areas from protesting as they were the worst hit by the pandemic (Ngcamu & Mantzaris, 2021; Yende & Mkhwanazi, 2023). Going forward, the situation looks even worse as protests are likely to intensify in South Africa, according to the analysis conducted by Allan (2023) of the Municipal IQ that monitors unrests. More concerning is the fact that KwaZulu-Natal, the province investigated in this study, is the second out of nine provinces that is leading with service delivery protests (Allan, 2023).

The factors that contribute to such dissatisfaction are many and vary in their severity (Treasury, 2020). On the one hand, the challenges faced by municipalities and their constituencies are historical in nature as they can be traced back to backlogs created by the apartheid era government that was characterised by racial segregation inequalities and institutional flaws (Enaifoghee, 2022; Enaifoghee & Adetiba, 2018). On the other hand, the democratically elected local government's poor administration, lack of public participation, corruption, and political infighting, are some of the causes of service delivery protests (Enaifoghee, 2022; Sethunya & Mlambo, 2022). Amongst these, the major issue leading to most protests has been identified to be related to very poor communication between communities and their political representatives in the form of ward councillors and administrative officials in the municipalities (Allan & Heese, 2022; Masuku & Jili, 2019).

Communication appears to be neglected in research on factors contributing to service delivery protests. This omission ignores the fact that communication allows the provision of information to the citizens on challenges experienced by the administration and thus improves their efficiency as they avert protests (Mina-Raiu & Melenciuc, 2022; Ngcobo & Roya, 2023). This can potentially strengthen relations between local government structures and their constituencies. Hence, this study examines the importance of communication as means to enhance service delivery in rural areas. The aim is to determine the extent to which communication is prioritised in the wards under Ulundi Municipality by the ward councillors and municipalities.

Literature review

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is the Decentralisation theory. The selection of this theory is in keeping with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) and other policies derived from it that shift the responsibility of providing community services to local government. Similarly, Decentralization theory centres on the principle of self-governance as a vehicle to empower citizens to participate in decisions directed at service delivery (Selepe, 2023). Decentralised government functions are designed to enable public officials to have direct communication with their communities to address their needs (Selepe, 2023). The leadership that has an effective communication strategy at the local sphere of governance has the potential to provide good service delivery. This is so because such leaders can ensure citizen participation and keep residents informed on matters that affect them (Kalondo & Govender, 2021). In other words, it is through transformational leadership style that effective communication can contribute to the realization of local government goals of delivering good services working in consultation with communities (Atiku, Kurana & Ganiyu, 2023). In this instance, the critical leaders are ward councillors as political representatives and municipal officials who provide the administrative aspect of service delivery.

The transformative leadership of the democratic era fits well with the Ubuntu philosophy. Ubuntu expounds the importance of working in cooperation with and valuing others by showing that you care and

value their presence (Hlongwane et al., 2019; Mokhutso, Marumo & Motswaledi, 2023; Nzimakwe, 2014). The leadership of this nature would always aim for consensus through collective decision-making as they communicate with communities. This kind of a leader shows consciousness of the importance of their constituency through whom they gained the position of power bestowed upon them. Communication should not occur only when leaders seek votes and then forget about the voters afterwards. Leaders should bear in mind that a human being exists through communion with other human beings (Hlongwane et al., 2019; Mokhutso, Marumo & Motswaledi, 2023). Communication of this nature is encouraged because it promotes good service delivery by enabling public participation in decision-making on matters related to their needs and to hold officials accountable (Mamokhere, 2023; Masiya, Davids & Mazenda, 2019; Modise, 2017).

A study conducted by Selepe (2023) in a South African municipality sought to examine the variety of communication channels adopted to involve various stakeholders. The focus of that study was on professional stakeholders and it found that there was no synergy between some of the municipalities and various traditional leadership institutions (Selepe, 2023). Whilst Selepe (2023) acknowledges that it is communities that are the key stakeholders, his study does not include communities. Hence, the current study mainly focuses on communication between municipal officials and communities at grassroots level. Communication between municipalities and communities is worth investigating because communication contributes to community participation and service delivery that meets their needs (Kemp & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2020). Such community participation would take place in the form of meetings called upon by councillors and municipalities to engage on issues that affect their constituencies (Enaifoghe & Adetiba, 2018; Ndaba, 2014). Ndebele and Lavhelani's study (2017) in a rural area of South Africa located in Limpopo province found that the interviewed communities cited poor communication between them and their ward councillors as the cause of service delivery protests.

Zwane and Mamabolo (2023) prefer to use the concept of 'participatory governance' because it allows communities to have a voice on matters that involve them. This in turn provides transparency and encourages accountability whilst deepening democracy (Bester, 2020; Zwane & Mamabolo, 2023). Yet, Boateng and Acheampong's (2022) study conducted in Ghana found that community participation was in the form of labour and only the traditional authorities were consulted but at limited level. It would therefore be interesting to examine the extent to which and depth of communication between communities and municipality members in a rural South African context with a focus on the province of KwaZulu-Natal where such studies are lacking. The rurality of the area requires special attention because from the apartheid history to present these areas and their communities have suffered neglect resulting in them having limited resources, lower income, lack of infrastructure, deprivation and disadvantage (Ndebele & Lavhelani, 2017; Zindi & Shava, 2022).

Research methods

This study was undertaken using quantitative research techniques. This involved the use of a questionnaire to measure the extent to which and effectiveness of communication between communities and their municipalities in a rural area of South Africa in KwaZulu-Natal province called Ulundi Municipality. The administration of the questionnaire was conducted among the 116 randomly selected households of this municipality that came from different wards. The questionnaire was administered in person by the researcher with the help of four assistants who were all conversant with the community and the local African language. The participants who were able to read and answer the research questions were handed over the questionnaire to respond on their own. Most of the questions required a Yes or No response to facilitate speed at which the respondents were able to complete answering the questionnaire without taking too much time and stressing them with sophisticated questions.

The study received ethical clearance the university and the gatekeeper’s letter granting permission to collect data from the Ulundi Municipality (ref 4/2/3/1/4). The questionnaire contained the consent form which clarified and protected the respondents’ right. These rights were either read to them or they were asked to read them themselves before signing to indicate their voluntary consent to be part of the study. Furthermore, there was nothing in the questionnaire and in the collection of data that required the respondents to provide their personal details. The answered questionnaires were merely coded for purposes of data analysis.

Findings and Discussion

The study was designed to evaluate the extent to which communication activities are managed within the Ulundi Municipality to ensure community participation and information sharing on matters of service delivery. The analysis of the collected data was conducted thematically as informed by the six questions on the issues under scrutiny regarding communication between communities and their local government structures as represented by the municipality. The discussion of the findings is descriptive.

Ward Councilor Knowledge

The first question sought to establish if the respondents from different wards of the Ulundi Municipality were familiar with who their representatives were in the municipality. A ward councilor would be someone who lives in the area making them closest to the community. This person would therefore be a good representative of the community in the municipality council. They would be the first port of call for the community should they have service delivery concerns. In the same breath, ward councilors would be expected to stay in constant consultation with their constituencies to establish their needs and present them at council meetings (Atiku, Kurana & Ganiyu, 2023).

The question simply asked: Do you know your ward councilor? To which the response was either Yes or No. Figure 1 graphically depicts the obtained responses.

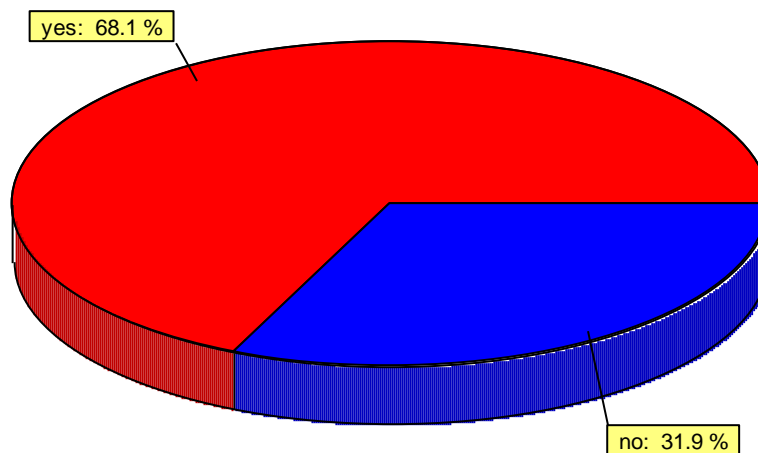


Figure 1: Ward councilor knowledge
Source: Ndaba, 2014

It was satisfying to note that most respondents were familiar with this critical figure that they would have put in this position during the democratic process of local government election. As indicated in Figure 1, 79 (68.1%) of the respondents were on the affirmative, whereas 37 (31.9%) were negative.

The high positive response suggests the community involvement and participation in the politics of their locality as they were aware of representative structures in their society (Ntsebeza, 2005; Reddy, Sing & Moodley, 2003). This is the critical leader through which they would communicate with their municipality. Yet, the number of respondents who did not know (31.9%) their ward councilors is a cause for concern. It is these community members that are likely to initiate violent and destructive service delivery protests without first seeking communication with their immediate representatives.

Ward Councilor Meetings Frequency

As a follow-up to the previous question, the respondents were asked to select the answer that indicated the frequency of their meetings with the ward councilor in their respective wards. The point of calling such meetings would be for the transformative leadership to communicate matters that concern their constituency and contribute positively to the mandate of the local government of delivering good services (Atiku, Kurana & Ganiyu, 2023; Kalondo & Govender, 2021). In the same breath, this would allow the community to participation in decision-making on matters related to their needs and to hold officials accountable (Mamokhere, 2023; Masiya, Davids & Mazenda, 2019; Modise, 2017).

Figure 2 presents different times at which the respondents indicated the frequency of their meetings with the ward councilor of their area. Many of the respondents 49 (42.24%) put the frequency at monthly intervals. The rest were split across with 11 (9.48%) denying ever meeting with their councilor, 16 (13.79%) being uncertain if they had met with their councilor, 14 (12.7%) putting their response on a weekly basis, and 26 (22.41%) settling for every two weeks. As many as 9.48% respondents indicated that there were ‘never’ any calls for meetings, whilst 13.79% of the respondents selected the option that indicated that they were uncertain, as in ‘I do not know’. The responses to these two last options came as expected considering that in response to the first question there were respondents (39.1%) who indicated that they did not know their ward councilor, see Figure 1.

The variation in responses suggests that different ward councilors operate differently in their wards when it comes to the frequency or lack thereof of meetings with their constituents. It is assuring to observe that at least there is some communication and consultation between councilors and their constituents in many wards.

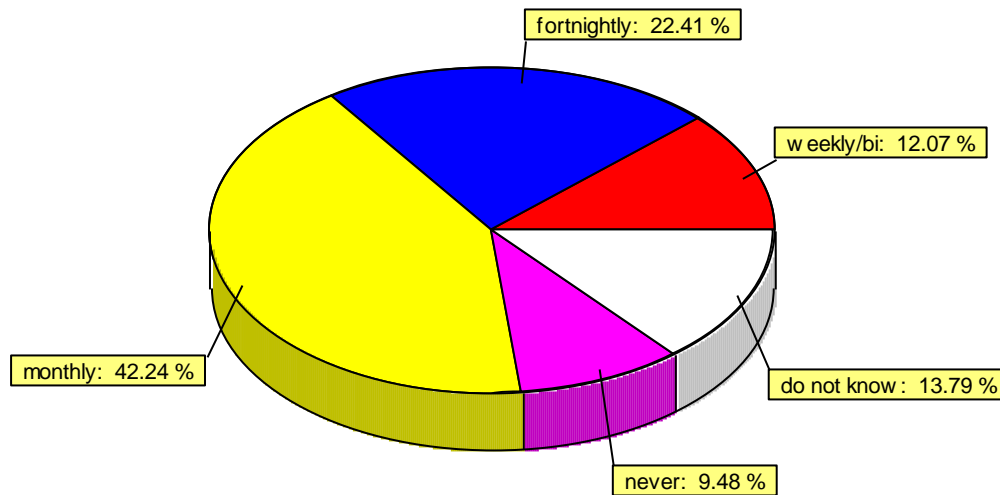


Figure 2: Ward councilor meetings with community members
Source: Ndaba, 2014

Forms of Communication Used to Call Meetings

The modern technologically advanced world presents various forms of communication that can be adapted to various community means and preferences. Bearing this in mind, the respondents were asked to select forms of communication utilized by their ward councilor and/or the municipality. In this case, the respondents were asked to select from six options, the last of which was ‘I do not know’.

Figure 3 depicts the rates of various types of communication used by the ward councilors. Twenty (17.24%) of the respondents stated that their councilor and the municipality use public notice boards to communicate with them. Municipal offices were selected by 25 (21.55%) respondents, loud addresses by 26 (22.41%), and newspapers by 10 (8.62%). Radio was selected by 11 respondents (9.48%). As many as 24 (20.69%) respondents did not know how the municipality and ward councilors communicate with them. Noting that the context of the study is a rural area, there were no options that would include the social media, such as Facebook. These were deliberately left out because of the understanding that they would not reach many citizens who still rely on cheaper forms of communication.

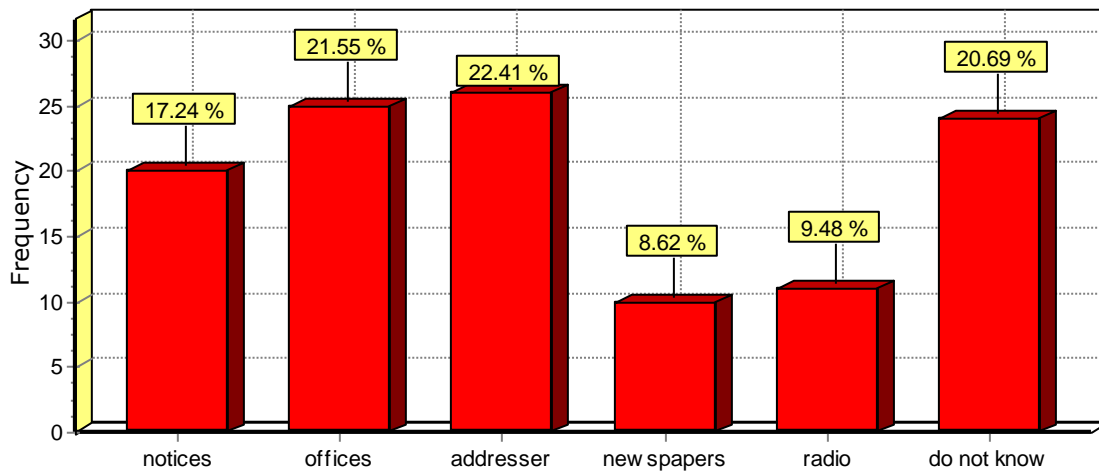


Figure 3: Forms of communication used to call meetings
Source: Ndaba, 2014

Meetings Attendance

The Constitution of South Africa and various legislative bodies developed in line with it encourage community participation on matters concerning them. Participatory governance provides communities with the opportunity to voice their concerns to ensure there is transparency and accountability in a democratic state (Bester, 2020; Zwane & Mamabolo, 2023). For this reason, it was important to understand if indeed citizens utilise this opportunity.

The fourth question inquired whether the respondents attended the meetings called by councillors and the municipality.

Table 1: Attendance of meetings

Yes	95.69%
No	4.31%

Table 1 depicts that most respondents (95.69%) claimed that they attended the meetings. This overwhelming positive response was, however, not consistent with the responses received on previous

questions. In the previous responses there were indications that the meetings are neither called nor known to be called. Unexpectedly in this question there were a lot of respondents who claimed to attend meetings. It is unclear if the question might have been misunderstood in its totality.

Officials Present at Public Meetings

As continuation to the previous question, the fifth question required the respondent to select the type of officials who attended their public meetings. The respondents were provided with three options of official expected to attend public meetings where they would seek information on citizens' needs and share challenges experienced with providing expected services.

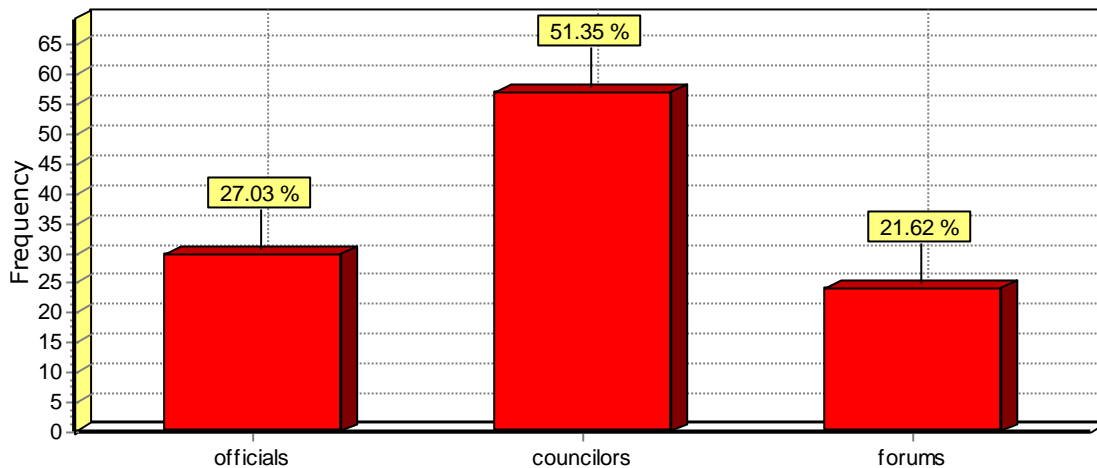


Figure 4: Officials at public meetings

Source: Ndaba, 2014

Figure 4 depicts that 30 (27.03) respondents identified municipal officials as present at different public meetings to engage with the public. Most respondents 57 (51.35%) highlighted the presence of their ward councilors at public meetings. Lastly, 24 (21.62%) respondents selected community form members. It is a positive result to note that ward councilors are part of communication platforms created to engage them with their communities. This shows that ward councilors of this municipality observe both Ubuntu philosophy and Batho Pele Principles that encourage consultation, identification with citizens, cooperation, people first, among others (Department of Public Service and Administration, 1997; Hlongwane et al., 2019; Mokhutso, Marumo & Motswaledi, 2023; Nzimakwe, 2014).

Leaders Responsible for Service Delivery Communication

Leadership has been identified as instrumental in the development of effective communication channels with the public. It is the same leadership that is expected to have Ubuntu by recognizing that they need to show that they care about the people they represent (Hlongwane et al., 2019; Mokhutso, Marumo & Motswaledi, 2023; Nzimakwe, 2014). The last question required the respondents to indicate the leaders they perceived to be responsible for communicating service delivery matters. The respondents were provided with five options to choose from.

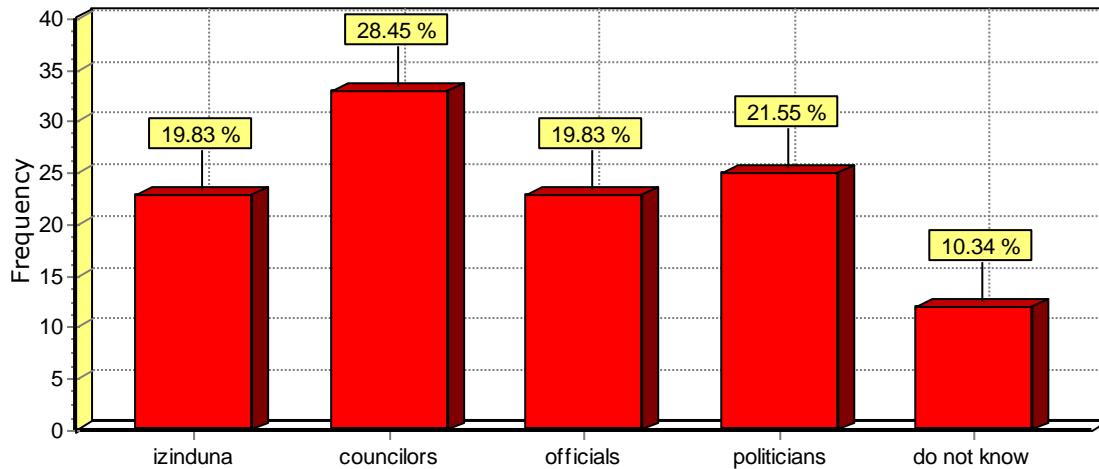


Figure 5: Leaders responsible for communicating service delivery matters
Source: Ndaba, 2014

Figure 5 visually depicts the respondents' perspectives on whom they consider to be responsible for communicating their requirements on service delivery matters. Many of the respondents preferred their ward councilors (33.45%) to communicate their service delivery needs. Councilors were followed by 25 (21.55%) politicians to solve service delivery difficulties. Izinduna and municipality officials received equal preference by 23 (19.83%) respondents. A small group of 12 (10.34%) respondents were uncertain as to who should address their service delivery demands.

The results of this part of the survey shows the public's awareness of who should address their service delivery needs. They are aware that the established local government structures are accountable and must be transparent on service delivery matters (Mamokhere, 2023; Masiya, Davids & Mazenda, 2019; Mokhutso, Marumo & Motswaledi, 2023; Modise, 2017; Ntsebeza, 2005; Reddy, Sing & Moodley, 2003).

Conclusion

The large number of citizens who live in isolated rural districts were previously neglected and continue to experience socio-economic inequalities. This has resulted in many of rural communities migrating to urban areas in search of a better life and jobs. Their situation is complicated by the existence of political and traditional leaders who are sometimes in conflict when it comes to the delivery and communication of services. It then becomes essential that municipalities take the responsibility of creating an environment whereby the process of governance is accessible and available to all citizens. The rural municipalities must try to eliminate communication barriers that prevent effective and efficient access to participatory governance which should enable constituents to contribute to decision-making and avert maladministration (Ndaba, 2014). It is encouraging to note that this study established that citizens of the Ulundi Municipality generally perceived their councilors and municipal officials to be at the forefront on the communication of service delivery matters and progress initiatives. It should be noted though that in some wards there were indications of poor communication that were perceived to contribute to the failure to deliver services. Municipalities and politicians need to address the issues of communication in some of the wards if they are to avert service delivery protests. The local sphere of governance, especially in rural areas, needs to be strengthened to promote public participation in decision-making.

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