



# Techniques for effective government service delivery

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**Background:** This article discusses techniques for effective government service delivery using e-participation to engage with citizens. It highlights the lack of literature detailing these techniques, despite previous initiatives to use information and communication technology (ICT) for citizen engagement. The study used institutional theory to describe the government's environment.

**Objectives:** The objectives were to investigate techniques for effective government service delivery using e-participation, explore open government initiatives in South Africa and propose a framework for open government alignment.

**Method:** The method used was an interpretive inductive qualitative case study. Data were collected through open-ended semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic and content analysis.

**Results:** The results indicate that the South African government still uses unstructured communication methods to engage citizens, lacks policies for open government initiatives and offers some services through the website, call centre and imbizo's.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that developing ICT applications for real-time interaction between government and citizens could improve engagement and participation.

**Contribution:** The study suggests that using the proposed framework for open government alignment can enhance citizen-government engagements.

**Keywords:** service delivery; open government; e-participation; collaboration; transparency.

## Introduction

This article is focused on the techniques for effective government service delivery using e-participation to engage with citizens. Public service delivery is typically understood to involve the reduction of government spending, enhancing the standard of public services and the effectiveness of governmental operations and raising the likelihood that the chosen and executed public policies will be successful (Cuadrado-Ballesteros et al. 2013).

The White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery was created by the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) as early as 1997 in an effort to promote transformation and service delivery improvement in the public sector. The White Paper discusses how the Batho Pele principles might improve service delivery (Government 2011). Consultation, service standards, redress, access, courtesy, information, transparency and value for money are among the eight Batho Pele principles espoused in the White Paper.

The guiding principles were put forth to encourage service providers' responsibility and to emphasise the value of user voice in pressuring the government to develop more efficient service delivery methods (Mokitimi, Jonas & Schneider 2023). The local level of government is the component of South Africa's public sector that is closest to the citizens according to the Republic of South Africa's 1996 Constitution, Section 152, which mandates that local governments invite community stakeholders to participate in matters that directly affect them, making it crucial to its role in supplying basic needs, delivering services and fostering local development (Ndevu & Muller 2017). Local government is where municipalities place a priority on democracy, long-term service delivery, social and economic development, environmental protection, engaging the community, alleviating poverty and working with other hands of governments. Despite their importance in the social welfare of the citizens, many municipalities in South Africa are facing service delivery protests because of lack of provision of basic services and citizen's participation.

For instance, Emfuleni Local Municipality in 2014, experienced the biggest number of service delivery demonstrations as the primary source of discontent with how basic municipal services are delivered, particularly in informal settlements as compared to Lesedi Local Municipality. Sedibeng Municipalities improved public service delivery and looked into innovative ways to solicit public opinion, especially in light of the social stigma attached to criticizing public authorities (Akinboade, Mokwena & Kinck 2014).

The South African government in its efforts to encourage citizens to participate in government has implemented an open government initiative to advance transparency, give citizens more power, combat corruption and use new technology to improve governance (Hunton et al. 2010). These initiatives aim to improve the interaction between the release of public information and citizen participation (Porumbescu et al. 2020). Open government as a political philosophy or method displays itself through open government data (OGD), which is unrestricted and non-confidential data created with public funds and made freely available for any purpose (De Souza, d'Angelo & Lima Filho 2022). A tangible illustration of the core principles of open government and open data encourages more participation and interaction with the government.

### Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality

Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality (BCMM) was also impacted by the implementation of open government in south Africa. The BCMM, one of South Africa's eight metropolitan regions, is home to 893 157 people or 1.5% of the country's total population (Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs & Buffalo City Metropolitan 2023). The city is unique in that it has a composite land use pattern that combines aspects from the rural, peri-urban and urban settings. The province's eastern region's primary urban centre is Buffalo City.

This region's corridor of populous areas is made up of the seaside city of East London in the east, Mdantsane in the centre and Dimbaza in the west. According to the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs and Buffalo City Metropolitan (2023), Buffalo City has a shoreline that is 68 kilometres long and a total area of around 2750 kilometres. According to the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs and Buffalo City Metropolitan (2023), the Municipality provides its citizens with the following services: electricity, roads and transportation, waste management, water and sanitation and human settlements.

Rulashe and Ijeoma (2022) advice is that BCMM should create platforms for each of the neighbouring communities in compliance with the relevant laws. Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality should use its loud hailer, radio and newspapers as well as put up posters not only at the

municipality's door but also in grocery stores and other places frequented by people of the community in order to successfully democratise development and spread information. According to Ndasana, Vallabh and Mxunyelwa (2022), the absence of housing, poverty, sanitation services and a lack of communication were some of the reasons for the main causes of violent service delivery demonstrations at BCMM.

The objectives of this article are to understand the techniques for effective government service delivery using e-participation as a way to engage with citizens. The rest of the article is structured as follows; Literature review. Underpinning theory, Research methodology, Results, Discussion of findings, Conclusion and Recommendations.

## Literature review

In most countries, the goal of public service departments is to spearhead the modernisation of the public sector by helping other government agencies implement their management policies, systems and structural solutions within a broadly applicable framework of norms and standards to enhance service delivery (Sewdass 2012).

Technologies that enable working from a secure place to provide services are needed by the public entities such as healthcare industry, manufacturing sectors, educational institutions and more. These specialised needs for governments may be satisfied by digital technology and Industry 4.0 tools (Chandra et al. 2022).

The introduction and use of information and communication technology (ICT) in private sector firms such as e-Commerce and e-Banking as well as the widespread use of the Internet by the general public have led to an increase in comfort and familiarity with the technology in various contexts. As a result, numerous governments have spent a significant amount of money creating IT infrastructure and implementing ICT to better serve their citizens (Kaliannan, Raman & Dorasamy 2009). The same is done by municipalities as government entities.

Municipalities are mandated to deliver the following to the public; clean water, regular refuse removal, reliable electricity, municipal healthcare services, public safety, grass cutting, parks and open spaces, beautification and environmental conservation. The greatest way for local government to serve its constituents is through effective service delivery where the services provided to local communities are more responsive to local requirements (Osman et al. 2014).

The local sphere of government makes up the component of the South African public sector that is closest to the citizens and is therefore indispensable in its role of providing essential goods, services and developing the local areas. Nevertheless, there is a lack of public confidence in the local government system as evidenced by the wave of service delivery protests

that have occurred throughout South Africa (Ndevu & Muller 2017). As governmental employees serve South African citizens, Batho Pele lays out guidelines for public servants conduct and behaviour, and it is a method of service delivery that centres people on the planning and management of the public sector (Government 2011). It represents a significant shift from previous regimes that kept the majority of South Africans outside of the political system to one that aims to incorporate all citizens in order to achieve a higher quality of life for everyone while fostering civic engagement.

The smallest municipalities employ a variety of service delivery strategies, including contracting with for-profit businesses, non-profit organisations and other governments. However, citizen satisfaction with services provided by other governments, including those provided by private contractors, is lower, indicating that there is no direct trade-off in service quality because of for-profit contractors (Mohr, Deller & Halstead 2010).

## E-government

Electronic government is defined as the use of ICTs by the government to provide citizens and businesses with the chance to interact and conduct business with government by using various electronic media, such as telephone touch pads, fax machines, smart cards, self-service kiosks, e-mail and the Internet and EDI (Almarabeh & Abuali 2010).

The term 'e-Government' refers to services offered by a government to its citizens through the use of information technology (IT), especially the Internet and related technologies (MacLean & Titah 2022). Although open government efforts frequently seek to improve public involvement within administrative bodies by leveraging ICTs, open government is conceptually and practically based on e-government (Park & Kim 2022). The use of e-government has improved service delivery by the government through the use of services available on government websites; however, service quality is a powerful driver of value creation, and that perception of service value depends greatly on how well e-government systems promote efficiency, democracy and inclusiveness (Li & Shang 2020). Technology development has completely changed how businesses and services are run, which is good for consumers and organisations as a whole. The electronic government effort was started in order to bring Malaysia into the information age, enhance internal government processes and provide better services to the citizenry by enhancing the convenience, accessibility and calibre of services provided to the general public and enterprises (Pitchay Muthu Chelliah et al. 2016).

The personalised e-government services evolved from an early stage that were triggered by specific straightforward conditions or events, such as tailored email notification services for the expiry of passports or other official papers, to an information technology-based intelligent stage (Liu et al.

2020). The capability of providing public services is at the core of this public value, and IT costs relative to total municipal costs can explain efficiency in public service delivery by municipalities (Hilhorst et al. 2022).

Information and communication technologies are recognised as being the main forces behind this new wave of change in the definition of the relationship between the city and its citizens, and Smart Cities heavily rely on ICT-enabled strategies and solutions that involve local governments, residents and communities in direct participation (Gagliardi et al. 2017). Organisations must stay current with trends as ICT develops globally, and the majority of nations can adapt to these technological developments by utilising the resources at their disposal to enhance service delivery (Ashaye & Irani 2019). Service delivery is any interaction with the public sector in which clients, such as citizens, residents or businesses, look for or provide data, manage their affairs or carry out their tasks in an efficient, foreseeable, trustworthy and user friendly way (Mangwanya 2019).

## E-participation

E-participation is defined as a technology-mediated conversation between citizens and decision-makers that guarantees dynamic interaction and introduces current, innovative methods for the general public to participate (Porwol, Garcia Pereira & Dumas 2022).

Silal and Saha (2021) makes an argument that the use of electronic participation by governments in involving citizens results in a greater degree of human development as well as improved environmental performance, both directly and indirectly through the reduction of corruption. The majority of recent research makes a distinction between online and conventional offline engagement. However, Qiu et al. 2023 take a different approach and distinguish between government-led and Internet-empowered citizen participation, and their findings demonstrate that while the Internet offers citizens a public forum to engage in discussions about public policy, the formal policymaking process does not fully incorporate online feedback. In other words, despite the digital age's institutional bias against citizen participation, the Internet's capacity to advance inclusive policymaking is constrained.

E-participation is influenced by systems with value and the most recent citizen action in India to pass an anti-corruption law shows that participation is for the common good. However, e-participation was more common in e-communities than in other e-participation services, and as a result, citizen initiatives were more frequently taken up than those of the government (Alathur, Vigneswara Ilavarasan & Gupta 2016). E-participation technologies are a necessary component of the transition to smart governance, and it is the municipality's responsibility to provide more of them in order to raise the adoption rate to over 70% (Kopackova, Komarkova & Horak 2022).

Planning authorities around the world are using e-participation more and more to enhance and promote public participation in decision-making processes (Abas et al. 2023). The adaptability, anonymity and simplicity of e-participation deployment may also assist in overcoming cultural and gender barriers to public participation in urban development, especially in conservative societies (Boureggh et al. 2023).

## Research problem

The literature emphasises the use of ICT to effectively address the subpar service delivery that is observed in government departments in South Africa, in accordance with the aforementioned service delivery challenges. The limited usage of ICT technologies in service delivery emphasises the significance of this study in correcting South Africa's subpar service delivery patterns, particularly in government departments for citizen participation.

## Underpinning theory

The theory that underpins this study is institutional theory and the elements of institutional theory. Institutional theory argues that organisations are societal and cultural systems that are linked in a setting of social expectations and precepts about what is appropriate behaviour (Hinings, Gegenhuber & Greenwood 2018). Institutional theory examines the steps taken by structures, rules, schemas and routines to establish their authority as norms and to maintain social behaviour inside a given organisation. Institutional theory also addresses organisational changes that may result from many factors that challenge the status quo (Van Wijk et al. 2019). It also aims to comprehend the processes by which local structures adapt to larger models and the relationships between actors (Van Wijk et al. 2019).

## Organisation

The process of creating an organisation includes growing involvement of actors within an organisational, emergence of cross-systems of domination and styles of partnership, increasing the amount of information with which these organisations must deal with, as well as the development of mutual awareness. According to Voronov & Weber (2020), an actor is an entity that is part of a network of other units that make up an institutional order. It is established by the institution and is given actorhood (standing as a recognised unit) by its place within the institution and in connection to the domain that the organisation governs. In addition, actors can also be individuals playing specialised roles (such as managers). Actors encounter experiences that help them feel connected to both the institution and their own sense of self (Patriotta 2020).

## Service delivery techniques and institutional theory

Initiatives involving OGD have been put into place as an appropriate instrument for enhancing service delivery and promoting democracy (Mungai, Van Belle & Joseph 2015).

All state enterprises and government organisations must contribute to this programme; hence the implementation process needs to be well planned, and this necessitates the creation of laws and policies that promote it or the modification of those that limit free access to information without jeopardising security.

If government organisations and departments believe that supporting OGD initiatives would have favourable political, social, economic, administrative and practical benefits on society and the community at large, they are more likely to do so (Altayar 2018). The institutionalisation theories that were discovered to be relevant to open government as a technique for service delivery are presented and serve as the direction that makes the assumptions and research questions connected to each of the identified concepts clear. The concepts listed below were found to include the following: Collaboration focused on shared meaning and mutual awareness among actors; e-participation focused on the primary action of citizens in structures of government departments; open government focused on external factors, policies and initiatives; transparency focused on problem-solving techniques; mimetic isomorphism is the study of how organisations imitate others as they learn or in situations when they are unsure how to adopt specific structures, whereas coercive isomorphism refers to the formal and informal pressures an organisation feels from society and other organisations (DiMaggio & Powell 1983). People who operate in a given occupation collaborate to determine the rules and practices of their line of work. Production is governed by normative isomorphism, which also provides the cognitive underpinnings and legal basis for their professional independence (DiMaggio & Powell 1983).

Open government has connections to normative isomorphism and coercive isomorphism, two institutionalisation theories. When it comes to normative isomorphism, the actors in charge uphold the policies, strategic documents and plans that will lead to governed actions, a cognitive foundation and a legal framework. Coercive isomorphism causes citizens and the corporate sector to actively participate in the municipality's everyday activities. The public is getting more and more interested in having access to official government data and information. Because of the quick growth of ICT, the extensive use of portable devices and the variety of user needs, there is a greater need for accessibility to government data. As a result, a lot of government organisations now publish their data online. The OGD is helpful for the government as it may guide policy decisions, aid in development plans and reveal what the public wants (Altayar 2018).

Mimetic isomorphism is one of three institutionalisation notions connected to transparency. The open government concept has largely been governed by nations that are members of the Open Government Partnership (OGP). BCMM, in terms of openness and accountability, must

adhere to the norms specified by OGP, demonstrating mimetic isomorphism. The creation of open government efforts to promote transparency is benchmarked against those of other organisations that have done so. Globally, national and local governments establish open data projects with stated objectives such as improved productivity, better transparency or increased economic growth. Although few of these effects have been demonstrated, an increasing number of government agencies are making their datasets available to the public (Heimstädt 2014).

Coercive and mimetic isomorphism are the two institutionalisation notions that result from collaboration. External stakeholders can exert pressure on one another to advance an agenda for change or the execution of open government projects by using coercive isomorphism in partnership. Other government organisations will put functional pressure on the open government stakeholders, particularly when necessary resources and infrastructure are lacking. Mimetic isomorphism will emerge in situations where newly introduced government departments to open government struggle to comprehend best practice manuals and tools for adopting open government and end up copying those who have accomplished.

E-Participation is related to the institutionalisation of coercive isomorphism. Once the citizens comprehend the necessity and potential of e-participation, as well as how to utilise the e-participation engagement channels, coercive isomorphism will be experienced through the engagement channel.

The utilisation of technological tools for e-participation aims to improve two-way engagement between citizens and their institutions; however, citizens are adopting e-participation at a comparatively modest rate (Shihab & Hidayanto 2021).

## Research method and design

The methodology used in this study is a qualitative, interpretive case study, and qualitative research generally looks for an in-depth knowledge of a researched topic incorporating human and social interpretations, experiences and behaviours (Tuffour 2017). The primary goal of qualitative research is to comprehend human experiences

through a humanistic, interpretive lens (Jackson, Drummond & Camara 2007). Open government as a technique for service delivery research may take the form of positivist, interpretive or critical theory; similar to how social research is conducted; however, the study followed an interpretive philosophy. Interpretive research may offer a comprehensive understanding of a number of information systems phenomena, such as the creation and administration of information systems (Klein & Myers 1999).

The purposeful sampling that is often referred to as 'judgemental', 'chosen' or 'subjective sampling' refers to data collection methods that rely on the researcher's judgement when choosing the study's sampling units, such as people, cases or institutions, incidents or data points. The most accurate estimate of the populace variable of interest will come through purposeful sampling, which entails the random selection of units from a specific group of people without potential substitute (Guarte & Barrios 2006). Homogeneous sampling as one of the purposive sampling methods seeks candidates with comparable qualities or specified criteria (Etikan 2016). Participants in homogeneous sampling, for example, would be comparable in terms of age, culture, career or life experiences. The goal is to concentrate on this specific resemblance and how it pertains to the topic under consideration. For example, if one was researching open government, only those who had worked with open government for 5 years or longer would be included in a homogeneous sampling.

## Data gathering

The information was gathered through semi-structured one-on-one face-to-face interviews, official municipal records and the municipality's website. To gather information about the techniques for effective government service delivery using e-participation as a way to engage with citizens, the study interviews are divided into groups based on the many municipal departments, and each group is then discussed in detail, beginning with the management of each functional area. Participants in the study include BCMM department or unit management and employees. The total of 10 BCMM departments participated in the study and government documents, including citizen participation policies and manuals, was used as additional sources of information. Table 1 shows the departments who participated in the study.

**TABLE 1:** Participating departments.

| Participant | Position                            | Department                 | Job experience (years) | No. of years in position | Level of education |
|-------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|
| 1           | Information management practitioner | Knowledge management unit  | 8                      | 5                        | Degree             |
| 2           | ICT manager                         | ICT                        | 20                     | 7                        | Diploma            |
| 3           | Office manager                      | Local economic development | 19                     | 16                       | Degree             |
| 4           | Office manager                      | Finance                    | 13                     | 11                       | Masters            |
| 5           | Executive assistant                 | Human settlements          | 15                     | 8                        | Diploma            |
| 6           | Office manager                      | Corporate services         | 10                     | 6                        | Degree             |
| 7           | Office manager                      | Public health and safety   | 33                     | 14                       | Diploma            |
| 8           | Office manager                      | Executive support services | 13                     | 9                        | Degree             |
| 9           | Financial manager                   | Special programmes         | 33                     | 13                       | Degree             |
| 10          | BCMM youth chairperson              | BCMM Youth Council         | 3                      | 2                        | Diploma            |

No., number; ICT, information and communication technology; BCMM, Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality.

Data were acquired from a variety of sources, including interviews, documents and websites, in keeping with the interpretive case study tradition. Data were collected over a 6-month period. We conducted semi-structured interviews with key informants who were knowledgeable about and experienced with municipal operations. Purposive sampling was used to choose important informants from various units depending on the importance of their function in the municipality, as shown in the given table.

Data saturation is related to sampling procedures and sample size; adequate sample sizes are required for high-quality data (Gill 2020). When no new information is gathered from interviews or observations, data saturation occurs. This was the case with our participants as they were better aware about the municipality's operations and gave high-quality data. The chosen participants were able to speak eloquently about the topic under investigation. When participants offer high-quality data, fewer people are required.

According to interpretivism, truth and knowledge are subjective, as well as culturally and historically contextual, and are based on people's experiences and understanding of truth and knowledge (Al-Ababneh 2020; Ryan 2018). Researchers can never be fully detached from their own values and opinions, which will always influence how they collect, interpret and analyse data.

It makes logical sense to use an interpretive case study methodology to fully understand the intricate connections between people and government in social contexts (Andrade 2009). Understanding the techniques for effective government service delivery using e-participation as a way to engage with citizens is done using the BCMM case study. The interpretive case study of BCMM offers a chance to gain a thorough understanding of the issue being researched because an interpretive explanation captures the participant's point of view and converts it into a form that is understandable to readers.

## Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the University of South Africa and ethics consent was received on 6 March 2020. The ethics reference number is 076/SG/2019/CSET\_SOC.

## Results

This section analyses the empirical data and provides the study results.

## Analysis of interview data

Semi-structured in-person interviews were used to collect data. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data; when selecting themes to report on, the researcher is acknowledged as having involved in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis is a technique for detecting, interpreting and summarising patterns or themes in data. Otter.ai software was used to transcribe the audio data in order to synthesise the data and identify patterns and meanings. The first codes were created to represent the patterns and meanings of the data. Data that had a common meaning or were related were coded and compiled. The codes were used to construct themes and each theme was discussed. When a theme arises, the researcher analyses the data using a table based on the underlying theory that depicts the characteristics of institutions (Rachunkowo 2017). Table 2 shows Characteristics of Institutions.

The following section examines the interview data; it introduces the theme, then a subtheme, which is supported by a quote and a table defining some of its ontological aspects; lastly, it offers an interpretation.

### Theme one: Provide basic human needs

'In order to establish a transparent, secure, and friendly environment, BCMM is a municipality that must be structured to give its administration, budgetary, and planning procedures precedence to the fundamental requirements of its citizens and encourage their growth economically and socially.' (Participant 4)

The theme of providing basic human needs by municipalities is characterised by administration, budgeting and planning as a way to prioritise basic human needs. A municipality is closer to the community than other spheres of government and is expected to provide service delivery of basic human needs. Given the significant role that municipalities play in providing services to the public, IT managers are compelled to use ICT technologies in order to take into account the needs and opinions of the public. Table 3 highlights that municipality's must provide basic needs to the community through the use of budget, planning and good administration.

### Sub theme: Policies on governance

'BCMM does not have a specific policy for open government, however, the municipality have other policies such as budget policies and by-laws.' (Participant 4)

**TABLE 2:** Characteristics of institutions.

| Roles  | Utilitarian                     | Cultural symbols   | Written codes                            | Verbal codes   | Patterns and samples of behaviour                         |
|--|---------------------------------|--|--|--|---|
| From ordinary accounts to professional auditor | 8 elements of accounting method | Accountant's day, specific certifications and certificates | Laws, standards, regulations, guidelines | Informal rules of conduct for professional accountants | Codes of ethics for professional accountants and auditors |

Source: Rachunkowo, Z., 2017, *Institutional Theory of Accounting: New Opportunities and Scales of Profession*, viewed from [https://sj.wne.sggw.pl/pdf/ZFIR\\_2017\\_n1\\_s53.pdf](https://sj.wne.sggw.pl/pdf/ZFIR_2017_n1_s53.pdf)

This sub-theme shows that the BCMM municipality has no policies that promote and govern open government initiatives, but the municipality has other policies related to governance. Open data policies are significant because they aim to promote long-term transparency of government information and so contribute to citizens' rights to public access to government information, which is regarded as a key element of democracy (Zuiderwijk & Janssen 2014). Table 4 illustrate the importance of policies in governing municipal services.

### Sub-theme: Availability of strategic documents

'BCMM has various strategic documents such as Standard Operating Procedures, ICT Strategy, Public Participation Strategy, Communication Strategy, integrated development plan (IDT) and Service Delivery and Budget Implementation Plan (SDBIP).' (Participant 2)

The BCMM's Standard Operating Procedures, ICT Strategy, Public Participation Strategy, Communication Strategy, IDP and SDBIP are among the strategic instruments that support open government. Government strategy documents in South Africa must mention open government in order to demonstrate the official adoption of open government. In Spain, Open Government initiatives have moved in a hierarchical fashion from the central government to local governments, adopting various action strategic plans to transition from bureaucratic and centralised governance models to more open, participatory and collaborative ones (Alcaide Muñoz, Alcaide Muñoz & Rodríguez Bolívar 2023). Buffalo

City Metropolitan Municipality strategic documents do not mention open government, indicating that the municipality has not fully adopted open government. Table 5 highlights the significance of strategic documents in provisioning of services by the municipality to its citizens.

### Sub-theme: Use of information and communication technology platforms

'BCMM use a website, newspapers, emails, SharePoint, letters, and call centres to share information such as tenders and financial annual reports with the public.' (Participant 1)

Citizens can access some of the municipality services through the website, call centres and social media platforms. The municipality uses the unstructured media such as social media to communicate with its citizens about outages. The use of ICT to achieve the three characteristics of openness, participation and collaboration is referred to as open government (Ganapati & Reddick 2014). The BCMM municipality collaborates with citizens via website, call centres and social media, and these platforms only allow for one-way connection with citizens, making the entire concept of open government impossible. This will only change if more municipal services are made available online, collaborative tools with two-way interaction are deployed, and citizens participate in decision-making bodies online. Table 6 illustrate that modern cities must use ICT tools to strengthen broader availability of services through internet.

TABLE 3: Provide basic needs.

| Roles               | Utilitarian features                   | Cultural symbols | Written codes                 | Verbal codes | Patterns and sample of behaviour |
|---------------------|--|------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|----------------------------------|
| Provide basic needs | Administration, budgeting and planning | Local government | Laws, regulations, guidelines | By-laws      | Municipal ethics documents       |

TABLE 4: Policies on governance.

| Roles                                    | Utilitarian features   | Cultural symbols                             | Written codes | Verbal codes | Patterns and sample of behaviour |
|--|--|--|---------------|--------------|----------------------------------|
| Govern municipal services and operations | In accordance with applicable provincial and municipal laws, BCMM is authorised to manage the local governmental affairs of its local population through its own initiative. | <i>Municipal Systems Act of 2000, No. 32</i> | Policies      | By-laws      | Municipal ethics documents       |

BCMM, Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality.

TABLE 5: Strategic documents.

| Roles   | Utilitarian features  | Cultural symbols | Written codes          | Verbal codes | Patterns and sample of behaviour                |
|---|---|------------------|------------------------|--------------|---|
| Strategic documents govern various services provided by BCMM Departments to its clients | Each BCMM department has the responsibility to draft its strategic plans in response to Integrated Development Plan | IDP              | BCMM operational plans | By-laws      | Service delivery and budget implementation plan |

BCMM, Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality; IDP, integrated development plan.

TABLE 6: Use of information and communication technology platforms.

| Roles   | Utilitarian features   | Cultural symbols               | Written codes   | Verbal codes                                  | Patterns and sample of behaviour |
|---|--|--------------------------------|---|---|----------------------------------|
| An effective modern city must have connectivity to ICT that is of a high standard and reasonably affordable | Digitisation and growth of knowledge-based ICT services on the strength of more stable and faster internet and broader availability of services through free Wi-Fi | A creative and successful city | The National Integrated ICT Policy White Paper provides a comprehensive policy framework for making South Africa into an open, progressive society that embraces technology | White Paper on National Integrated ICT Policy | Modern ICT infrastructure        |

ICT, information and communication technology.

## Theme two: Well governed and responsive municipality

'The BCMM will require a responsive and well-run municipality that can foster relationships with community members and stakeholders, make it possible for the general public to participate in decision-making, and maintain consensus on the socioeconomic development.' (Participant 5)

The theme emphasises the necessity for a responsive and well-run municipality that can foster relationships with its constituents and foster popular engagement in decision-making and efficient service delivery. Citizens' participation entails interacting with government officials or agencies in an attempt to influence policy decisions, and it results in benefits such as the promotion of an open and inclusive culture, a sense of responsibility among citizens, awareness about public issues, empowerment, the legitimacy of government decisions and broader information sources for governments to make better informed decisions (Arshad & Khurram 2020). Table 7 promulgate that a municipality must be responsive to build trust with its stakeholders.

### Sub-theme: Other forms of communicating with citizens

'The Imbizo is the most utilised offline channel in South Africa including at BCMM.' (Participant 9)

The BCMM municipality still relies on imbizo's to communicate with its citizens. The advent of ICT, as embodied by the Internet, has triggered a global wave of technological change, providing more options for Open Government Information channels such as online channels supported by the internet as opposed to traditional offline channels such as telephones and face-to-face meetings (Zhang 2021). The Imbizo is a face-to-face meeting that is normally held during working hours

while many people are at work and few attend government meetings because of this method but in BCMM imbizo is still the most utilised information sharing method despite advances in ICT tools. Table 8 indicate that the municipality is still using imbizo to consult stakeholders in developing its IDP.

### Sub-theme: Use of unstructured communication medium

'The BCMM uses social media for unstructured communication such as outages and they can measure their reach.' (Participant 6)

The municipality uses the unstructured media such as social media to communicate with its citizens. Government entities are exploring possibilities with social media to interact with their customers, and numerous experts see these media as a powerful set of tools for reinventing government-citizen relationships. However, the risk of using social media is that opening up information may increase mistrust in government and general criticism of government activities (Vela 2012).

### Sub-theme: Increased public trust

'BCMM employees believe trust among citizens increased as a result of making information available on the website.' (Participant 6)

Public trust has increased because of the availability of information through sources such as website and social media. Trust in government refers to citizens' and businesses' faith in the government's efforts to do what is right and viewed as fair (Schmidhuber, Ingrams & Hilgers 2021). Individual feelings of inclusion in government decision-making can lead to increased trust in the public sector by mediating institutional openness. The ICT tools used to enable citizens to participate in government activities

**TABLE 7:** Well governed and responsive municipality.

| Roles                   | Utilitarian features          | Cultural symbols                 | Written codes                   | Verbal codes                           | Patterns and sample of behaviour                     |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Responsive municipality | Build trust with stakeholders | Public participation initiatives | Public participation strategies | Mid-year budget and performance report | Plan for service provision and budget implementation |

**TABLE 8:** Other forms of communicating with citizens.

| Roles                         | Utilitarian features        | Cultural symbols      | Written codes                        | Verbal codes     | Patterns and sample of behaviour |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|
| Development and review of IDP | Impactful on socio-economic | Community involvement | No. 32 of 2000 Municipal Systems Act | Council for BCMM | Public participation framework   |

BCMM, Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality; IDP, integrated development plan.

**TABLE 9:** Smart City.

| Roles                | Utilitarian features          | Cultural symbols                           | Written codes                  | Verbal codes    | Patterns and sample of behaviour                               |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|-----------------|--|
| Implement smart city | Increase connectivity in BCMM | World Class ICT Systems and Infrastructure | ICT and Communication Strategy | MSCOA compliant | City Development Strategy receives input from the ICT Strategy |

ICT, information and communication technology; BCMM, Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality; MSCOA, municipal standard chart of accounts.

**TABLE 10:** Public trust.

| Roles                         | Utilitarian features                     | Cultural symbols                         | Written codes   | Verbal codes  | Patterns and sample of behaviour   |
|-------------------------------|--|--|---|---|--|
| Build trust with stakeholders | Democratic institutions that are capable | Capable, ethical and developmental state | The 1996 South African Constitution urges governmental institutions to work together in a spirit of confidence and goodwill by providing support, communicating, and coordinating activities while abiding by set procedures. | Good corporate governance creates the trust needed to enable the production of sustainable value. | In order to bring compliance concerns including internal audit, fraud and risk management as well as information technology to more people's attention, BCMM introduced the King III Report on Corporate Governance. |

BCMM, Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality.



improves public trust. Table 9 encourages municipalities to adopt technology that allows citizens to engage in municipal programs, thereby enhancing public trust. Table 10 advocates for including everyone's opinions in government decisions, which subsequently increases public trust in the government.

### Theme three: Participatory governance through open government initiatives

'The BCMM and other stakeholders' collaboration has produced several noteworthy results.' (Participant 8)

The theme facilitates collaboration among many stakeholders in order to accomplish shared objectives. The public sector sees innovation as a chance to build partnerships that will promote collaboration among diverse stakeholders from various organisations in order to improve the delivery of public sector goods and services and thereby create and realise public value (Barrane et al. 2021).

#### Sub-theme: Mode of collaboration between stakeholders

'Citizens are involved through party representation in Parliament and municipalities.' (Participant 8)

Collaboration between stakeholders still happens through political party representative and civil society organisations, ordinary citizens are not directly involved in decision making.

Online participation is one method of responding to citizens' needs in a way that is not possible under South Africa's current political system, which relies on political party representation and civic organisation, while the majority of citizens are not directly involved in government decision-making bodies. Table 11 suggests that the most effective way to implement initiatives in organizations is through collaboration and partnerships. It highlights that citizens are not actively involved in the rollout of projects and services by municipalities, and this needs to be improved to accelerate project execution and prevent protests.

#### Sub-theme: No open government initiatives committees

'In the BCMM and other government entities in South Africa, there are no open government committees that are focused on observing the execution of open government initiatives including openness, cooperation, and online involvement.' (Participant 9)

The municipality does not have an open government committee that looks into open government initiatives. The use of data monitoring committees (DMCs) to oversee clinical trials has grown and changed as the Greenberg Report established the notion in 1967 (Calis et al. 2018). Open government committees are required to supervise government agencies' use of open data. Table 12 indicates that the political system in South Africa involves citizens in government activities through ward councillors. The ward

**TABLE 11:** Collaboration between Stakeholders.

| Roles  | Utilitarian features   | Cultural symbols                   | Written codes                             | Verbal codes  | Patterns and sample of behaviour  |
|--|--|------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| The most effective way to implement initiatives is frequently through collaboration and partnership. | BCMM continued to collaborate on many initiatives with public businesses, parastatals and other government agencies. | Intergovernmental Relations Forums | Framework for intergovernmental relations | By making significant investments in infrastructure, BCMM will accelerate the execution of our catalytic projects and programmes, working with the Buffalo City Development Agency and other social partners. | Pledges, compromises, trade-offs, collaborations and partnerships with other partners, as well as those among important role players, will all be used to facilitate collaboration. |

BCMM, Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality.

**TABLE 12:** Ward councillors.

| Roles  | Utilitarian features  | Cultural symbols   | Written codes  | Verbal codes  | Patterns and sample of behaviour  |
|--|---|--|--|---|---|
| Ward councillors work to boost involvement in the council's democratic system. | Ward committees are participatory community organisations that support the coordination of consultations, the communication of information and the promotion of citizen engagement. | Ward Councillors, Community Development Workers and Traditional Leaders serve as the primary channels of communication between the municipal government and the citizenry. | According to the Local Government: <i>Municipal Structures Act of 1998</i> Sections 73 and 74. | The ward councillor serves as the ward committee's chair and is therefore an integral member of the group. The council designates the proportional representation (PR) councillor to support the ward councillor in a ward. | All clusters (Inland, Midland and Coastal Urban and Rural Regions) must be visited by the Office of the Mayoral Committee, which is led by the Executive Mayor, the Speaker and the Chief Whip, on a quarterly basis to provide progress reports on those wards' top priorities and to give council members a chance to interact with management. |

**TABLE 13:** Open Government Committee.

| Roles  | Utilitarian features   | Cultural symbols   | Written codes   | Verbal codes   | Patterns and sample of behaviour   |
|--|--|--|---|--|--|
| The Committee on Open Government monitors and provides guidance to the government, the general public and the news media on laws pertaining to access to information, public sessions and individual privacy protection. | Two weeks following the conclusion of each meeting, OGP makes the complete minutes of the Steering Committee and all Subcommittee meetings online. | The Steering Committee of the Open Government Partnership is made up of representatives from both government and civil society, reflecting the joint nature of the initiative. | Members of the Steering Committee are elected at each annual meeting and serve a rotating term. | The OGP Steering Committee in South Africa approved a Declaration titled The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will be implemented with the help of the Open Government for its execution. | The Republic of South Africa's 1996 Constitution, Chapter 10, Section 195 sub-section (1), outlines the guidelines for how the government should interact with its people, deliver high-quality services and uphold ethical standards. |

**TABLE 14:** E-participation.

| Roles   | Utilitarian features   | Cultural symbols  | Written codes                                      | Verbal codes  | Patterns and sample of behaviour   |
|---|--|---|--|---|--|
| Councillors are in charge of organising public engagement and consultation. | The BCMM Speaker is in charge of managing the overall oversight of the public participation process. | Promote effective financial and administrative management by ensuring community participation | National Policy Framework for Public Participation | In its efforts to promote real oversight and increase public involvement, BCMM has demonstrated a substantial commitment to citizen participatory approaches in the operation of the municipality | The <i>Local Government Act, 33 of 2000</i> , also referred to as the <i>Systems Act</i> , reemphasised the need of encouraging citizen involvement in municipal operations for municipalities |

committees facilitate communication and promote citizen engagement. However, most citizens are not politically affiliated and may miss important information they need to receive, highlighting the need for technology-facilitated communication. Table 13 indicates that the open government committee monitors and provides guidance to the government, general public, and media on laws related to access to information. Therefore, it is essential to have this open government committee in all municipalities. However, in BCMM, the open government committee has not yet been established.

#### Theme four: Provide mechanisms and processes for public participation

'BCMM must provide suitable mechanisms and processes for public participation.' (Participant 10)

The municipality needs to provide mechanisms and processes that involve citizens in decision making and policy development. The South African constitution emphasises the participation of all people in governance at all levels as the goal is to correct past mistakes and establish a more just, equal and peaceful country (Bagui 2013).

This section analysed the interviewed data by identifying themes and sub-themes providing a quote for the theme then describing them in a table with the underpinning theory elements and an explanation below. The following section covers the discussion of findings, conclusion, and recommendation.

## Discussion

This section evaluates the research findings in the light of published, pertinent literature and using the interpretations, the suggestions would then be formed.

This study seeks to explore and discuss techniques for effective government service delivery using e-participation as a way to engage with citizens. According to the findings, the following challenges must be resolved first if e-participation is to enable efficient citizen involvement.

#### Government should enable e-participation through technology

Government should collaborate with its citizens by utilising effective e-participation tools to organise, manage and fulfill the basic human needs of the people. Using e-participation tools that promote collaboration among governments and citizens to enhance laws while also meeting citizens' basic human needs, citizens may take part

in public decision-making by directing, planning and budgeting to meet their requirements (Androniceanu & Georgescu 2022). These researchers have found the similar pattern in their research. Table 14 indicates that public participation in BCMM is managed by the Speaker and Councillors, who facilitate consultations and engagements. However, the use of technology for this purpose has not yet been adopted.

#### Lack of guidance on the use of online media

The municipality lacks basic guidelines on how to use online media such as blogs, social media and other related websites. In 2008, Canada set policies regarding how government workers should utilise social media, including corporate blogs, social networks and a Wikipedia-like effort (Picazo-Vela, Gutiérrez-Martínez & Luna-Reyes 2012). Guidelines on social media usage as tool to interact with citizens can be developed by municipalities in South Africa.

#### No full utilisation of information and communication technology platforms

Some municipal services are available to the public via the city's website, contact centres and social media channels. Information and communication technology is used to boost citizen involvement, social inclusion, political accountability, as well as transparency in government, openness and ability to respond. Information from the public sector is a valuable asset that has high potential in several different stakeholders, such as government departments, corporate entities, universities and civic organisations (Wirtz, Daiser & Mermann 2018). The majority of South Africans still access government services by physically going to the municipality and stand in long queues instead of utilising technology to access services.

#### A lack of governance relationship management

There is a lack of a responsive and effective municipality that can build connections with its stakeholders and citizens, promote public participation in decision-making and deliver high-quality services. Government entities and procedures are commonly viewed as being inefficient because of a lack of motivation to satisfy citizens' aspirations and a lack of competitive providers for government services (Evans & Yen 2006).

#### Continuous use of traditional means of communication

The municipality continues to use imbizos to interact with its citizenry despite the numerous availability of ICT solutions that can assist include individuals who are not physically attending the event. The South African government's imbizo

is a tool designed to strengthen administrative relations with the electorate in an effort to galvanise them to tackle problems with delivering services. The government believes the imbizo is a suitable venue for interacting with the general public when they express concerns about the provision of services, and the government responds with the specific intent of resolving all such concerns (Kosanke 2019).

The municipality engages citizens through strategies such as Imbizo's, but this framework suggests that Imbizo's must be supplemented by usage of social media and blogs to incorporate individuals who are not physically present at the meeting. Although the mobile app is currently not working at BCMM, social media, websites and mobile apps are also used to engage citizens. There is no open government committee to monitor the implementation of e-participation initiatives, policies and citizen participation in decision-making using technology. The use of e-participation tools, such as online media and mobile apps, is required to include citizens in a variety of municipal matters. Instead of having a two-way interaction, the municipality currently posts material on its website and social media platforms for informational purposes only.

In order to oversee the implementation of e-participation initiatives, open government policies and public e-participation, the open government alignment for effective e-participation suggests the establishment of appropriate applications that are specifically designed to include citizens in decision making processes.

## Conclusion

E-participation is proving to help organisations to be more transparent, accountable and accessible to their citizens. The South African government is a partner with OGP organisations, and all government organisations are supposed to start open government initiatives. The findings show that BCMM and other South African departments have not implemented e-participation, and they are still using the traditional methods such as imbizo's and party or civic representation to engage stakeholders on various matters. The traditional methods of engaging stakeholders can only accommodate a few people in a physical meeting, whereas IT solutions can help departments to be more open, transparent, accountable, collaborative and accessible.

Social media is also used by BCMM and other government departments to announce events that are taking place and few people comment on those posts. The nature of social media is used as a tool for posting information, then citizens consume it. Comments that are made on those social media platforms are not formal inputs that can be taken into consideration by the department. Organisations must implement proper formal applications/software that can be integrated into formal structures of government departments and citizens must also feel that they are in a

formal meeting. The social media platform and its use do not have qualities of a formal meeting setting; hence most of the comments that are made by the citizens derogate from the point of discussion. Written reports are posted on the websites, and few citizens download the reports. Citizens are not able to ask questions on the posted reports from government websites, and they are written in English. Websites are used as a platform for posting information and there is no interaction between citizen and the government.

## Recommendations

E-participation promotes that citizen must be part of what is being done by government; however, the current technology does not enable that interaction between citizens and government. Applications that are meant to assist government administration and citizens to interact in real time through live chats, live discussions and reviewing documents online need to be developed. These applications must be integrated with formal structures such as Councils, MPAC and others committees to involve citizens to government operations. Citizens should be equipped with e-skills to enable everyone to participate in government operations. Once all citizens have e-skills, they will be able to participate in government initiatives using technology.

Collaboration between government departments is not yet explored by the literature and more research needs to be done in that aspect. Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality and other government departments are still using traditional mechanisms where stakeholders meet face-to-face to address service delivery matters. If government departments still prefer to use physical meetings to engage each other with plenty of resources at their disposal, how much more with citizens who have no digital resources to engage. There is a need for government departments to shift from doing their operations manual and start incorporating technology that will make them to be more open, transparent, accountable, interactive and responsive.

Traditional websites are not interactive or responsive because citizens are expected to download reports from the websites and if you need to ask clarity, there is no channel one can use to ask questions. The language that is used in those reports is English, whereas the majority of BCMM citizens are Xhosa speaking individuals or if we take South Africa, the majority of people speak indigenous languages. These reports are not useful and timely because they narrate a story of what happened in previous financial years. One of the eight principles of OGD demands that data must be timely and what we are getting from the government now is old information that narrates a story. The open government for effective e-participation model is a vehicle that enables citizens to be part of the planning, creation, implementation and delivery of services through the use of e-participation tools that enable live chats, discussion forums, video conferencing and surveys.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## Authors' contributions

S.G. conducted the research as part of the master's thesis requirements, focusing on data collection, analysis, and the discussion of results. M.P. provided guidance throughout the study in the role of supervisor. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

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