

A sustainable development approach for community participation in community safety aspirations: Insights from Tshwane district municipality, South Africa

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Abstract: The soaring crimes in South Africa place the safety of individuals, communities and businesses in danger. Crime poses a serious threat to the realisation of sustainable development and community safety. Sustainable development aspirations require the active involvement of individuals and communities to address public safety challenges. This study explores the importance of community participation in community safety aspirations using sustainable development lenses. The study used Tshwane District Municipality as a case. A qualitative research approach was adopted. This operated within the exploratory research design. A purposive sampling technique was adopted to select the participants. Community members, Ward Councillors, and members of Community Police Forums (CPF's) gave their insights to the study. A total of 25 respondents participated in the study. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and analysed through the Thematic Content Analysis. The study findings revealed that community members feel alienated from law enforcement initiatives and dissatisfied with their level of participation in local safety initiatives. In highlighting the importance of community participation in community safety endeavours, the study established that community participation fosters collaborative strategies. The study further revealed that community participation cultivates increased engagement, provides culturally relevant practices and effective resource allocation in pursuit of safer communities in South Africa. This study denotes that the sustainable development approach to community safety is fundamental and provides direction into how the well-being and resilience of societies can be realised. The research highlights the importance of strengthening the role of communities in decision-making processes and prioritising community needs and expectations in local safety initiatives.

Keywords: *Community participation, Community safety, Crime prevention, South Africa, Sustainable development, Tshwane.*

1. Introduction

Crime levels in South Africa know no bounds as they erupt in communities, across police stations, petrol stations, shopping malls, highways, and taverns just to mention a few (Ngoveni et al., 2022; Singh & Zondi, 2022). While efforts have been put in place to reduce crime and violence in the country, the problem remains widespread (Rakubu et al., 2023). The soaring and ever-evolving crime in South Africa put the safety of individuals, communities and businesses at stake (Roelf, 2020). When communities feel unsafe, it impedes their efforts to participate in economic and social activities which are vital for sustainable development (Maulana & Wardal, 2023). Despite a plethora of efforts being made on many fronts by the governments through various institutions and state organs to ensure public safety and security, the scourge of crime and violence in South Africa is a rude awakening for the need to reimagine how community safety can be a lived reality in South Africa.

In conceptualising community safety, this study draws from the definition provided by De Wet et al., (2018) who view it as a more broadly environment where people can live without experiencing fear

or threats to their health or well-being. Community safety is concerned with the collective experiences of people as a whole, rather than the individual people living within a community (Sharky et al., 2017). In as much as community safety aspirations are encapsulated in South Africa's National Development Plan of 2012 and the White Paper on Safety and Security of 2016, the phenomenon remains underexplored (Singh, 2020). This is despite community safety being a fundamental requirement for the realisation of sustainable development in South Africa (Singh, 2020; Ngoveni et al., 2022). The NDP which was crafted in tandem with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development identifies community safety as one of the fundamental components of achieving sustainable development (Govender, 2022).

In light of the preceding, it should be noted that building safer communities in South Africa remains a complex and challenging task (Kempen, 2018; Govender, 2020). This is because high levels of youth unemployment and corruption, combined with severe levels of inequality, drug and alcohol abuse, breakdown of family structures, rapid urbanisation, and poor health and educational outcomes, are among the key drivers of increasing levels of violence across the country (Rakubu, et al., 2023). As Martin-Howard (2023) argues, South Africa records more than 2.1 million crimes annually and this plunges the socioeconomic development aspirations of the country at stake. Notably, it is the already vulnerable and impoverished communities that bear the brunt of the effects of crime and violence (Buthelezi, 2020). Research has shown that the state, on its own, 'is not responsible for ensuring community safety, prevent and control crime' independent of its citizens (Fonseca et al., 2020; Singh & Zondi, 2020). However, a search of the literature on the subject matter of community participation in community safety initiatives in South Africa produces negligible results notwithstanding the centrality of public safety and security in policy documents such as the National Development Plan of 2012 (Ngoveni et al., 2022). In as much as community participation is lauded in crime prevention, community safety, and policing, there are still gaps in literature on why communities should be involved in policing efforts in pursuit of safer communities. This study was conducted to highlight the importance of active citizen participation in community safety aspirations. The ultimate goal of the study is to influence a paradigm shift in policy and practice in reimagining how community safety can be realised in tandem with sustainable development.

2. Nexus Between Community Participation and Community Safety

As South African communities grapple with soaring violent and non-violent crimes, the participation of communities remains fundamental (Steyn & Klopper, 2020). In South Africa, the determinants of crime include inequality, poverty, racial tensions, and gender discrimination (Rakubu & Olofinbiyi, 2022). The consequences of crime and violence are far-reaching and extend from loss or damage to personal property to assault and death (Singh & Zondi, 2020). In light of this, community participation has emerged as a crucial element in the quest for enhanced crime prevention and community safety (Masuku & Motlalekgesi, 2022). As Maulana and Wardah (2023) posit, the active participation of citizens and collaborative efforts with various stakeholders and law enforcement agencies yield positive outcomes in addressing security concerns and crimes. A wide range of research revealed that communities' involvement in community safety initiatives fosters proactive strategies that not only reduce crime but also improve community perceptions of policing, and foster greater cooperation and engagement from the public in maintaining public order and safety (Imperiale and Vanclay, 2021; Fonseca et al., 2020; Suguwan et al., 2023).

In light of the foregoing, Maulana and Wardah (2023) opine that community participation in community safety aspirations recognises the importance of harnessing the resources and knowledge of local residents in addressing their unique safety challenges. According to Barron et al., (2023), community participation in designing and implementing safety measures is laudable because the traditional policing style revolves around a rapid and reactive response to crime which is deemed less effective in preventing and controlling crime. As such, community participation should be considered because it is now generally acknowledged that the state cannot guarantee the safety of the community and that successful crime prevention requires the collective efforts of the government and its citizens (Graan, 2016; De Wet et al., 2018; Singh & Zondi, 2020; Maulana & Wardah, 2023). Furthermore,

Masuku and Motlalekgosi (2020) infer that community participation in safety measures triggers local solutions to local problems. Simply put, active public participation can evoke the feeling of ownership and responsibility to ensure peace and comfort in crime-stricken places (Sharky et al., 2017). Singh and Zondi (2020) weigh in and posit that increased community participation contributes to a deeper understanding of the underlying economic, cultural, and social factors that contribute to criminal behaviour thereby enabling more sustainable and holistic solutions to be developed.

3. Community Safety and Sustainable Development

The Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development commonly known as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a comprehensive framework for addressing pressing global challenges, including the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies (Sugiawan et al., 2023). In view of this, the SDGs that South Africa ratified in its national developmental aspirations provide a multifaceted approach that harmonizes economic, social, and environmental progress. (Nyahunda et al., 2022). It is worth noting that SDGs have a significant impact on community safety (Imperiale and Vanclay, 2023). The SDGs recognise that sustainable development cannot be achieved without ensuring safe and secure communities (Barron et al., 2023). Scholars have long recognised the intricate relationship between SDGs as efforts to create more sustainable communities inherently require addressing the social dimensions of risk and fostering a culture of community resilience (Imperiale & Vanclay, 2021; Barron et al., 2023).

For instance, Goal 16 of the SDGs, "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions," aspires to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels" (Sugiawan et al., 2023). What can be deduced is that Goal 16 encompasses a range of targets, such as promoting the rule of law, reducing all forms of violence, and ensuring responsive, inclusive, and representative decision-making (Barron et al., 2023). Furthermore, SDG-9 on investment in information and technology can play a crucial role in enhancing community safety through improved infrastructure, sustainable industrialization, and innovation (Maulana & Wardal, 2023). This can include the development of early warning systems, the embracing of smart city technologies, and data-driven decision-making processes that empower local authorities and communities to identify and mitigate risks (Sharky et al., 2017; Imperiale & Vanclay, 2021).

By embracing the sustainable development approach in community safety endeavours, it can be posited that the nexus recognises that development can be attained when communities leverage their strong social fabric and trust to collectively address their common challenges (Barron et al., 2023). Furthermore, sustainable development approaches in community safety embrace the participation of local communities in the social dimensions of development which can pave the way for more cohesive, secure, and future-oriented societies (Sharky et al., 2017; Maulana & Wardah, 2023). This study submits that since crime and violence are mainly rooted in lack of access to essential services, poverty and inequality, SDGs are poised to address these underlying factors and create an environment that fosters safer and more cohesive communities. This approach is yet to be explored in South Africa amidst harrowing crime levels which threaten the safety of communities.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Study Context

This study used the Tshwane District in Gauteng Province as a case. The selection of Tshwane hinged on the evidence of research that revealed that the district was recently in the top ten of violent crimes as per periodic crime statistics for the period October to December 2023/2024 released by the Minister of Police (Pheiffer, and Mphidi, 2024). As of February 2024, Tshwane District recorded a high spate of crimes such as hijackings, armed robberies, rape, and robbery and non-residential premises which ultimately means community safety is on the onslaught (Taumang et al., 2024). In light of this, police stations such as Mabopane, Soshanguve, Akasia, Brooklyn, Pretoria Central, Hammanskraal, and Sunnyside are among the top stations in the country with the highest levels of serious crime (Pheiffer and Mphidi, 2024). This study targeted communities in Soshanguve and Hammanskraal. The study

targeted community members, Ward Councillors and members of Community Policing Forums. These were deemed suitable to share their insights on the importance of community participation in community safety aspirations.

4.2. Research Approach and Design

This study aspired to have a naturalistic perspective on how the participation of communities is vital for the realisation of community safety aspirations in Tshwane District Municipality. In this regard, the qualitative research approach was adopted. Denzin et al., (2023) define qualitative research as a situational-based exercise where the researcher is immersed in the natural and practical context of the phenomena and where exposure to interpretative material practices to make the world understandable is available. Similarly, Creswell and Poth (2018) posit that in qualitative research the meanings and interpretations attached by people to the phenomena are explored, described, and construed in a natural setting. Furthermore, Rubin and Babbie (2016) aver that researcher embarking on qualitative research, are interested in learning and establishing people's interactions with their social worlds and the meanings they derive out of such interactions.

The qualitative research operated within the exploratory research design. Creswell (2017) postulates that exploratory research design is appropriate when undertaking studies where there is minimal research on the subject matter complemented by high levels of uncertainty and lack of adequate understanding. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the exploratory design is particularly in situations where there is little information available on the subject and the researcher aims to explore the topic in depth. As indicated in the introduction section, the phenomenon of community safety and community participation using sustainable development lenses remains underexplored and this necessitated the adoption of exploratory research design.

4.3. Sampling, Sample Size, and Data Collection

Participants of this study were purposively sampled. As Creswell and Poth (2018) posit, purposive sampling allows the selection of participants according to the needs of the study aimed at clearly bringing out the phenomena under investigation. This study required participants with an understanding of safety challenges in their communities and those involved in policing activities to share their insights. This necessitated the selection of community members, Ward Councillors and members of Community Policing Forums (CPFs). Drawing from the submissions by Rubin and Babbie (2016), qualitative research is more concerned about the richness of the information gathered and not the number of participants reached out to, the study had a sample size of 25 participants. These were distributed as 2 Ward Councillors, 5 CPF members and 18 community members. In-depth-semi structured interviews and focus group discussions were used as data collection methods. In light of this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Ward Councillors and CPF members while focus group discussions were conducted with community members. That said, 3 focus group discussions were conducted each with 6 participants. Also, a total of 7 interviews were conducted.

4.4. Data Analysis

According to Braun and Clarke (2016) in qualitative studies, data analysis involves the identification, examination, and interpretation of patterns and themes in textual data and describes how these patterns and themes answer the research questions. In this study, the qualitative data were analysed inductively using Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) whereby themes emerged from the data. This was done with the aid of qualitative data analysis software (Atlas. t.i 8 GmbH 2018) where the data were uploaded for easy description and classification of codes into themes. Braun and Clarke (2019) provided the phases of data analysis using the TCA. These include familiarisation with data, generation of initial codes, search and review of themes, searching, defining and naming of themes, interpretation, and compiling of information. The researchers followed the preceding outlined data analysis phases.

5. Findings and Discussion

This section provides the findings that emerged from the data. It presents the major themes that emerged from the analysis of data.

6. Views on Community Participation in Community Safety Issues

The study established mixed reactions on whether or not community members were involved in community safety initiatives. In view of this, information gathered from the FGDs converged in highlighting that community members were detached from a regime of community safety strategies. Some participants vehemently stated that they were not even aware of any community safety initiatives in their communities despite crime being rife. Some CPF members acknowledged that the availability of CPs in the communities cannot be regarded as a fully-fledged community participation approach as most communities are left out. The following narrations justify this.

"...The availability of CPFs is just a drop in the ocean and cannot be regarded as a whole citizen participation. Safety issues in this country require all hands-on deck..." (CPF member, Soshanguve).

"...We are not involved in anything. Sometimes you just hear of certain campaigns on something but, our insights and views are not considered in those initiatives..." (FGD, Hammanskraal)

"...Every community member is a key stakeholder in crime prevention and in creating safer and more confident communities. I can admit that we are not yet there in terms of making the creation of safer communities everyone's responsibility..." (Ward Councillor, Soshanguve).

What can be deduced from the findings is that community participation in community safety issues is minimal to none in the study sites. In as much as the study targeted CPF members who serve as custodians of community-based initiatives in creating safer communities, the common thread from the findings pointed out that the active involvement of citizens in community safety endeavours is yet to be realised in Tshwane. The findings give credence to the discoveries by Govender (2020) who established that community-based approaches to reducing violent crimes in Tshwane Municipality unearthed that community members are alienated from law enforcement initiatives and dissatisfied with their level of participation in local safety initiatives. What can be extrapolated from the findings of the study is that the disconnect of the rest community members in safety initiatives can significantly undermine the effectiveness of crime prevention activities, as local communities perceive these initiatives as being disconnected from their lived experiences and priorities. In support of this, Masuku and Motlalekgosi (2022), denote that a lack of community involvement in safety aspirations disregards the reality that community members possess an intimate understanding of their neighbourhoods and the challenges they face which is vital in fostering tailor-made interventions. The researchers contend that this underscores the importance of fostering genuine partnership and collaboration between law enforcement, local government, and community-based organizations to ensure that community safety initiatives are responsive to the perspectives and needs of those they aim to serve.

7. Perceived Importance of Community Participation in Community Safety Initiatives

Despite the preceding theme revealing that community members are not involved in community safety initiatives; the study went on to explore the perceived importance of community participation in community safety initiatives. The following themes emerged from the findings.

7.1. Fostering Collaborative Strategies

The findings of the study revealed that community participation in safety initiatives is a vehicle for collaborative strategies between community members and various stakeholders advancing this aspiration. In view of this, the study established that through collaborative strategies where communities are at the centre stage, proactive crime prevention strategies can be devised. The common thread from the interviews was that communities understand their needs and have an empirical understanding of the drivers of instability in their communities. For this reason, active citizen involvement can foster collaborative strategies which are fundamental in realising sustainable community safety goals. Some of the participants had the following to say.

“...Every community understands its needs and causes of the challenges. Such cannot be addressed when community members are being left out of any aspired solution. When communities are involved, collaboration is also easy... (Ward Councillor, Hammanskraal).

“... For us to have safer communities, we need to collaborate at community, intersectoral, multisectoral and cross-sectoral levels. The starting point is community involvement which breeds collaborative strategies.... (CPF member, Soshanguve).

What can be extrapolated from the findings is that community participation is essential for collaborative strategies which are instrumental in attaining community safety. Similar sentiments are shared by Sharkey et al., (2017) who infer that when communities are engaged in safety initiatives, their understanding of the dynamics of their problems is ignited which empowers them to take ownership of their safety. This also triggers a shared understanding between communities and law enforcement agencies. The researchers argue that shared understanding between communities and law enforcement agencies lays a foundation for collaborative engagements which are vital in averting community problems that cause instability. From the viewpoint of Barron et al., (2023), community involvement in safety issues enables communities to capture problem-solving resources and activate a series of mechanisms to ensure that their safety becomes a lived reality. This study posits that collaborative efforts empower communities to take ownership of their safety and security, thereby cultivating increased engagement and a sense of shared responsibility in addressing local crime challenges.

7.2. Cultivates Increased Engagements

The study further established that community participation in safety initiatives cultivates grounds for increased engagement as communities may feel more invested in their safety and environments. The participants revealed that their active involvement in safety issues triggers a sense of ownership and responsibility which are essential ingredients for widespread engagements in pursuit of eradicating disorder in their communities. Through increased engagements, the participants submitted that it increases cooperation with other stakeholders in security public order. The following excerpts characterise some of the responses.

“...When communities are actively involved in any initiative poised to serve their interests, the level of engagement is encouraging. What makes crime flourish in our communities is that we are pulling in different directions...” (CPF member, Hammanskraal).

“... I believe when we get involved in crime prevention and safety issues, we also take ownership and lead in diverse ways. We believe we know about tackling our problems...” (Community member, Soshanguve).

What can be drawn from this theme is that community participation in safety issues leverages the availability of community members to take the lead in addressing their contextual safety issues. Through increased engagements safety issues can be tailored to the specific dynamics and needs of communities, leading to more effective and sustainable safety solutions. Graan (2016) supports this inference by alluding that the involvement of residents in community safety initiatives is widely recognised as an effective approach to tackling the growing concerns of crime and violence in many regions. This is because increased community engagement has emerged as a crucial factor in addressing crime and enhancing community safety (Barron et al., 2023). This study contends that community participation creates enabling grounds for communities and individuals to develop models that allow them to understand how instability can hamper development. It also allows communities to identify high-risk areas and devise ways of ameliorating the risks they face in pursuit of safety for all.

7.3. Provision of Culturally Relevant Practices

This study further established that in as much as crime is a ubiquitous phenomenon destabilising community, there is a need to desist from “one size fits all” approaches. The common thread from the interviews converged in accentuating that when communities are involved in safety initiatives, it creates fertile grounds for culturally relevant practices to be realised. This is opposed to initiatives that are bulldozed to communities and run bereft of effectiveness. This in turn makes all community safety aspirations technocratic dreams with little impact on the lived realities of communities. The participants had the following to say.

“...I think our involvement leads to recognition of the uniqueness of our cultures and contexts. This cannot be overlooked when crafting safety measures...” (FGD, Soshanguve).

“...Community safety aspirations need to shy away from blanket approaches because communities face unique challenges so a regime of solutions to these problems should be context and cultural specific...” (Ward Councillor, Soshanguve).

These inferences are in tandem with the standpoint of Masuku and Motlalekgsi (2022) who denote that community participation and culturally relevant practices are crucial for effective crime prevention and community safety. This is because culturally relevant practices zoom into the dichotomies created by the historical injustices of apartheid which explains why black communities face higher crimes than other racial groups. On that note, community safety aspirations need to pay homage to how crime and instability are etched into diverse cultural tapestries (Graan, 2016). From the study’s findings, when communities are involved in safety endeavours, the prospect of devising measures that are responsive to their needs and beliefs is high. The researchers posit that this exposition is missing in South Africa’s community safety endeavours simply because they are designed, implemented and evaluated by outsiders. Thus, context and culturally specific safety measures should be the responsibility of those faced with crime and other forms of instabilities.

8. Effective Resource Allocation

The study established that when communities are involved in safety initiatives, resources are allocated where they are needed the most. What emerged from the discussions with the participants is that safety strategies devised by outsiders may not adequately address the challenges faced by communities. That said, submissions from all study sites converged in illuminating that communities grappling with instability and disorder are knowledgeable of where resources should be allocated in pursuit of alleviating the challenges. This is what they regard as effective resource allocation. In view of this, the participants denoted that through community participation in devising and implementing safety measures, resources can be channelled where change can be realised. The participants had the following to say.

“...We have the know-how to address our problems. I think resources for creating safer communities are not being put to good use because they are missing the target. Our involvement can address that... (FGD, Hammanskraal).

“...I think community involvement leverages effective resource allocation because these people know the underlying causes of their problems. Leaving communities out is a recipe for disaster as it has been the case...” (Ward Councillor).

The findings of the study give credence to Ojebode et al., (2016) who infer that community participation is essential for ensuring that limited resources are allocated towards the most pressing community safety and crime prevention needs. Graan (2016) made similar observations and alludes that community participation has become an increasingly vital component in ensuring resource allocation for community safety and crime prevention initiatives in South Africa. From these inferences, the researchers interrogate why community participation is not a fully-fledged phenomenon in South Africa. The researchers further contend that sustainable use of resources and sustainable development can only be lived realities when there is an effective use of resources or when allocated resources yield the expected results. This calls for a paradigm shift in ensuring that any community safety initiative by government, policymakers and law enforcement agencies mainstreams the needs and knowledge of local communities.

9. Conclusion

This study explored the importance of community participation in community safety aspirations using a sustainable development approach within the Tshwane District Municipality. The findings of the study affirmed that community participation in safety measures is a panacea for sustainable solutions. The study submits that community involvement in safety issues creates more inclusive and collaborative approaches to addressing public safety challenges. Furthermore, community participation creates fertile grounds for the broader notion of ownership and responsibility. This calls for various

stakeholders charged with crime prevention and safety aspirations to capitalise on citizens and instil greater community responsibility for activities that have been wholly deemed the responsibility of the state.

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