Dynamics of Traditional Leadership Participation in IDPs in the uMhlathuze Local Municipality of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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Abstract

An inclusive decision-making process is essential to the quality of service delivery at the local government level. However, traditional leaders in rural municipalities continue to be marginalised in this process. Therefore, the study aimed to explore the dynamics of traditional leaders' participation and influence in local government with particular reference to the integrated development planning (IDP) process. The study employed a qualitative research approach using an exploratory research design. A sample of 17 participants was drawn using purposive sampling. This included traditional leaders and political office-bearers, municipal administrators, ward councillors and ward committee members from the uMhlathuze Municipality. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, and analysed using thematic analysis. The study concluded that traditional leaders are critical stakeholders in IDP, playing the roles of rural-focused developmental advisers, consultants and advocates, community mobilisers, rural land use guardians, project and programme implementers and political liaisons. They faced several challenges in their roles, notably limited access to capital and operational funds, skills and knowledge deficiencies on municipal and administrative matters, challenged legitimacy, poor safety, role ambiguity and conflict with political office bearers. The implication was that their effectiveness in positively influencing local development was diminished and sometimes curtailed by these challenges. The study recommended the establishment of a standing conflict management committee that represents traditional leaders and the municipality's political and administrative components. Furthermore, education, training and capacitation of traditional leaders on the need for IDPs and their respective roles was recommended. In the long term, the national government needs to review the leadership structure of areas classified as communal and under the authority of ward councillors and traditional leaders so that there is role clarity and a mutually beneficial relationship.

Keywords: Integrated development planning; local government; public participation; service delivery and traditional leadership

Introduction

A traditional leader is a person who has been installed to the royal chair in line with the provisions of the traditional customs of the area and who holds the throne of an area of

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jurisdiction by his ancestry (Kurebwa, 2018). A common conflict in current literature is whether traditional leadership is still relevant within the current Western-derived public administration paradigms (Muriaas, 2009). This conflict is not only academic; it exists in reality in municipalities that house both a modern leadership and administrative system and a traditional one. In South Africa, several such municipalities have traditional and modern governance power centres, and the uMhlathuze Municipality is one of them. While attempts have been made to remedy this conflict through legislation, Reddy and Shembe (2016) argue that legislation to reduce such conflict remains vague on traditional leaders' position and responsibilities in the municipal development processes. With the same view, Beall and Ngonyama (2009) submit that understanding traditional leaders' role in the new democratic administration largely remains divided and critically challenged in both scholarly and social circles.

This paper explores the dynamics of traditional leaders' participation and influence in local government, looking at the integrated planning development (IDP) process as an activity of interest. IDPs are a critical constitutional requirement that direct and guide a municipality's vision and goals over a specific period (uMhlathuze, 2022). The uMhlathuze Local Municipality's 2022 to 2027 integrated development plan identifies several crucial challenges affecting its residents. These include high unemployment and poverty rates, crime and social instability, climatic and natural disasters, a poor local economy, ageing and dilapidated infrastructure, and consistently poor basic service delivery (uMhlathuze, 2022). The IDP is considered a key strategic document that could guide the municipality towards alleviating these problems.

This paper, therefore, contributes to understanding how the roles assigned to traditional leaders in a pluralist modern versus traditional leadership setting unfold. It contributes to understanding the multiple forces and factors affecting traditional leadership influence in local government planning and what could be done to optimise collaboration between conflicting power centres to enhance IDP processes.

The Regulatory Environment of Traditional Leadership

In the South African Constitution (Section 212), traditional leaders are recognised as a governance structure; various legislation is needed to consider this (South African Government, 1996). The White Paper on Traditional Leadership and Governance (South African Government, 2003) set the foundation for current legislation on traditional leadership functions. The paper proposed promoting governance partnerships between traditional leadership and the three government spheres (South African Government, 2003). The Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act followed this white paper. Under sections 4 and 20, the Act mentions several roles that traditional leaders play in local development. However, the Act does not clearly state that traditional leadership participation in local government is mandatory. Subsection 3(b) mentions that traditional councils "may enter into a service delivery agreement with a municipality by the Local Government: Municipal Systems Act, 2000 (Act No. 32 of 2000)" but this is not by mandate. In Section 19, the key legislated roles of traditional leaders relate to "customary law and customs of the traditional community concerned, and in applicable legislation." In the researchers' view, this leaves room for local government discretion on the involvement of traditional leaders in integrated development and other community affairs.

The Local Government Municipal Structures Act recognises traditional leaders and councils as the Constitution demands. It emphasises inviting traditional leaders who "observe a system of customary law" as stated in Schedule C of the Act. The Act also limits the percentage of traditional leaders who are part of a council meeting to a maximum of 10% of councillors. Nonetheless, a municipal council must consult traditional leaders on developmental issues affecting their traditional authority areas (South African Government). Regardless of such consultations, traditional leaders do not necessarily have a vote in council meetings (Reddy et al., 2023).

IDP and Traditional Leadership in the ULM

The uMhlathuze Local Municipality's IDP reports make much mention of traditional leaders' involvement in community development. The five-year IDP from 2022 to 2027 mentions traditional leaders as part of the Mayoral Coordinating Forum (uMhlathuze Local Municipality, 2022). As per the Local Government Municipal Structures Act, two traditional leaders sit in municipal council meetings (uMhlathuze Local Municipality, 2022). This is in comparison to 68 councillors who are on the same council (Municipalities South Africa, 2024). Note that there are many traditional authorities in the area, and these include KwaDube, KwaDlangezwa, KwaBhejane, KwaMadlebe, Buchanana, Obizo, Somopho, Luwamba and Fatima. Under the Ingonyama Trust, these authorities occupy 63 795 hectares out of the total municipal area of 123 325 ha. The municipality controls 4 259 ha of this land, and the rest belongs to the province, the national government and private entities. The municipality problematically associates land owned under traditional leadership with random service delivery and development (uMhlathuze Local Municipality, 2022).

Challenges and Dynamics of Traditional Leadership and Local Governance

Various factors have directly and indirectly influenced traditional leaders' quality of participation in IDPs. These include political and legislative factors and various forms of conflict with municipalities.

Traditional leaders have been under pressure to act neutrally politically in local development. This is a challenge considering the powers that ruling parties tend to exert on traditional leaders (Kurebwa, 2020). Political interference with the traditional office and political partisanship are not uncommon challenges these leaders experience (Kurebwa, 2020). Kadt and Larreguy (2018) also support the view that traditional authorities in South Africa are politicised, creating a breeding ground for political conflict in this office. As a non-neutral party in development, political relationships could also affect their roles in IDPs. Nzimande (2022), however, notes that traditional leaders are not necessarily victims of political interference as they have sometimes wittingly sought political endorsement or validation to enhance their power.

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interference as they have sometimes wittingly sought political endorsement or validation to enhance their power.

In their attempts to influence development, traditional leaders have often found themselves lacking adequate knowledge of the inner workings of local governments (Nzimande, 2022). Reddy et al. (2023) note that traditional leaders feel poorly equipped and sidelined in municipal governance. The outcome of this is felt in their communities' failure to benefit from cooperative governance with modern leadership systems. According to Mhlanga (2012), there is a conflict for recognition whereby traditional leaders feel that ward councillors are more recognised and better supported than they are. This lack of recognition comes with limited access to resources and a lack of the latter's involvement in municipal affairs (Mhlanga, 2012).'

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Another set of problems relates to role ambiguity and role conflict with ward councillors (Nzimande, 2022). Both offices attempt to influence development within similar communities, albeit poorly coordinated. Nzimande (2022) mostly blames traditional leaders' lack of knowledge of their roles. However, Reddy et al. (2022) see the legislative environment as a major contributor to this problem.'

Another view is that local government structures in South Africa are self-serving and more interested in wielding all the power in developmental issues. This is despite public participation legislation that mandates traditional leadership involvement in such planning (Kgobe & Mamokhere, 2021). Comaroff (2022), however, suggests that traditional leaders could be the power-seeking party about other political stakeholders, including those in the local and provincial government systems. This power perception could be a reason for traditional leaders' low appreciation for local government systems. In addition, local government demands levels of accountability that traditional leadership may not be ready to give. This is also a source of conflict with other forms of local leadership (Comaroff, 2022). Furthermore, traditional leadership offices have been centres of internal succession and power-hunger-driven conflict. This has affected local stability as sometimes self-interested parties have fought for control regardless of this impact on communities (Mustasilta, 2021).

A common area of conflict between traditional leaders and municipalities relates to land. Both want to control the same land for development, but this conflict is further complicated by overarching authorities like the Ingonyama Trust, in which land rights are also vested (Reddy et al., 2023). Mabecua et al. (2021) consider the land issue a highly complicated matter in which traditional leaders cannot always be viewed as victims. They are highlighted as among the advantaged landholders who fear any land reorganisation programmes that might interfere with their powers, even if these benefit the community they claim to represent. As noted by Mabecua et al. (2021), municipalities stand as a threat to their land control hegemony, resulting in a conflict of interest on how this resource is managed.

The above views from the literature highlight various broad views. One views traditional leaders as excluded and disempowered victims of the modernisation of local governance. The other view argues against them being a disempowered, disrespected group and considers them an influential group attempting to hold on to as much power as possible. As argued by the researchers, both views affect their role and influence in IDP processes in local government.

Theoretical Perspectives in Traditional Leadership in Municipalities

The dynamics of traditional leadership and local governance in IDPs and local governance and administration can be examined from a public administration paradigm perspective. The New Public Management (NPM) paradigm emphasises collaboration, flexibility, and responsiveness in public administration, moving from hierarchical and bureaucratic models to more networked and participatory approaches (Robinson, 2015). Nonetheless, despite moving towards NPM, traditional bureaucracies remain resilient in modern-day South African municipalities, as Munzhedzi (2020) argued. Traditional Public Administration as a paradigm has limited abilities to deal with pluralism, including the addition of traditional leadership as part of administrative structures (Robinson, 2015). This impedes the interaction of municipal leadership with other centres of community and power, including traditional leaders.

Munzhedzi (2020) recommends the adoption of NPM paradigms within municipalities, noting the lack of political will to do so as a significant impediment to this. Like many schools of thought, however, adopting new public administration is rarely discussed alongside the inclusion of traditional leadership in such paradigms. Munzhedzi (2020) notes that adopting the NPM, for instance, was inspired by Western governments' success in transforming from hierarchical bureaucracies of the traditional public administration and the realisation of benefits that included better resource management and public participation. In the NPM paradigm, traditional leadership may be considered a past phenomenon. In the uMhlathuze IDP cited above, this is also evident concerning traditional leaders as mere stakeholders of the development process rather than its leadership (UMhlathuze, 2020). Ndebele and Enaifoghe (2023) depict the modern local government set-up as characterised by innovative digital needs in line with global trends. Such movements from traditional administrative systems risk leaving behind conservative structures like traditional leadership.

Traditional leadership as an institution operates on cultural hierarchies with a high concentration of power in an individual (Yusup, 2022). The interaction of this concentrated power with modern systems like municipalities demands a paradigm shift that includes power sharing and practical conflict management (Machaku & Magaiza, 2023). This highlights two traditionally grounded systems that need to downgrade their hold on power to interact towards common goals like IDPs. Machaku and Magaiza (2024) note that dual or multiple centres of power are prone to conflict due to conflicting interests and competition for control.

Part of the traditional versus modern leadership debate is historical. Traditional leadership is argued to have lost legitimate power in the colonial and apartheid settings (Masiya, 2023). The role of traditional leadership in governance was further tainted by the perception that the office was part and parcel of the oppressive apartheid structures. Such views continue to affect traditional leadership legitimacy even if many people trust and support this office (Masiya, 2023).

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Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research question: What are the dynamics of traditional leaders' participation and influence in local government, with particular reference to the integrated development planning (IDP) process?

Methodology

Research Paradigm and Design

The study employed a qualitative research approach using an exploratory research design. The collaboration of traditional leadership and the municipal council in one entity, uMhlathuze Municipality, was investigated using a descriptive and exploratory case study design. The role of traditional leadership in the integrated development planning process of uMhlathuze Municipality was investigated using a qualitative research method. Some data collection methods are physical visits to key role players for interview purposes, participant observation, and focus-group interviews.

Study Setting

The municipality is located approximately 180 kilometres north of Durban on the far north shore of the KwaZulu-Natal province. With a land coverage of 123,359 acres, it is the largest municipality in the King Cetshwayo District. It has a population of 410,456 people with 110,503 households residing in various nodal areas, including Richards Bay, Empangeni, Felixton, eNseleni, Vulindlela, Heatonville, Bhucanana, and traditional areas (uMhlathuze, 2022).

Population and Sample

The study sample consisted of the following, drawn using purposive sampling procedures:
- Two traditional leaders from the uMhlathuze Local Municipality.
- Two political office bearers from the uMhlathuze Local Municipality.
- Five administrators from the uMhlathuze Local Municipality.
- Four ward councillors and four ward committee secretaries from the wards in the traditional areas of the study.

The data saturation point concept determined the sample size. The inclusion criteria were willing persons in the ULM's traditional, administrative, and political leadership who were directly involved in IDPs.

Data Collection Tools

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's six steps. These are: familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; identifying themes;

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reviewing and refining them; defining and naming the themes; and finally, writing up the analysis. (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Ethical Consideration

The study followed ethical research practices, which included obtaining participants' signed written informed consent, voluntary participation, and guaranteeing their confidentiality and protection from harm (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 93). The UMhlathuze Municipality authorised the researcher to carry out this study via a gatekeeper's letter. The University of KwaZulu-Natal Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Committee approved this study (Protocol Reference Number: HSSREC/00000802/2019).

Presentation of Results

Below are the study's key findings, starting with a description of participants.

Description of participants
Table 1 shows the study's participants, their roles and gender.

Role	GENDER	CATEGORY
Traditional Leader 1	Male	Traditional Leader
Traditional Leader 2	Male	Traditional Leader
Political Office Bearer 1	Female	Political Office Bearer
Political Office Bearer 2	Male	Political Office Bearer
Administrator 1	Male	Administrator
Administrator 2	Male	Administrator
Administrator 3	Male	Administrator
Administrator 4	Male	Administrator
Administrator 5	Male	Administrator
Participant 1	Male	Focus Group
Participant 2	Male	Focus Group
Participant 3	Female	Focus Group
Participant 4	Male	Focus Group
Participant 5	Female	Focus Group
Participant 6	Male	Focus Group
Participant 7	Male	Focus Group
Participant 8	Male	Focus Group

Source: Authors' construction (2024)

The study was conducted with 17 participants in total; two of them were traditional leaders from uMhlathuze local municipality, whilst two were senior political office bearers in the uMhlathuze local municipality. The study also consisted of five administrators serving the municipality in question and eight focus group participants.

Theme 1: Traditional leaders' roles in the IDP process

The participants highlighted the traditional leaders' various roles in the IDP process. Some of the roles had a direct bearing on the developmental agenda, while others helped to create an enabling environment for development. These are shown below:

1. IDP rural-focused developmental input (A4, A3)

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2. Programme and project implementation role (TL1, TL2)
3. Advocating for urban-rural imbalance removal (TL2)
4. Encouraging and mobilising community IDP participation (A3)
5. Consultative, advisory (A4, POB1)
6. Rural land use management (TL1, TL2, P5, P6)
7. Political liaison (P3, POB2)
8. Adoption and finalisation of budgets and plans (A3)
9. Resources mobilisation (P3)

The above roles are discussed in detail below.

- *Consultative, advocatory and advisory roles*

Traditional leaders were considered important advisers and consultants in rural development (A4, POB1). In A4's words, they brought "*input which they consider significant in their areas for development purposes."* TL2 saw them as advocates for rural-urban equality in development in urban-dominated local governments. The same participant noted the need for "*a balance between urban and rural development",* and this formed part of the traditional leaders' IDP agenda. The above roles were critical in the formulation and implementation phases of IDPs.

- *Community mobilisation*

Traditional leaders were considered critical in community mobilisation towards IDP idea generation and programme and project participation (A3). According to A3, traditional leaders had the role to

"lead, facilitate, or encourage communities to engage in the IDP process."

Other processes mentioned by A3 included the community information phases of an IDP process. TL1 and TL2 pointed out that the leaders played actual developmental programme implementation roles once an IDP had been approved.

- *Active implementation and monitoring*

Traditional leaders also helped in the adoption and finalisation of plans and budgets as part of key legislated committees, as highlighted by A3:

They also sit on municipal committees, such as the Financial Portfolio Committee, which discusses the budget, and the Planning Portfolio Committee.

These committees were multi-stakeholder, consisting of political leaders, municipal managers and administrators. The committees also monitored and evaluated IDP progress, making traditional leadership part and parcel of the IDP performance assessment system (uMhlathuze, 2022).

- *Political liaison roles*

Traditional leaders also played important political liaison roles within and outside the IDP structure. P3 mentioned this as a somewhat constrained role imposed by the over-politicised nature of local development. Traditional leaders were sometimes better placed to unlock

politically distributed developmental resources through their affiliations, including with municipality political party structures:

Generally, you must be a member of a specific political organisation and be both visible and active to access some of the key resources and opportunities from the government (P3).

In POB2's view, the political liaison role was sometimes disadvantageous as the leaders ended up prioritising a political rather than a developmental agenda, as exemplified by one leader who refused to liaise with a "*certain political party to which he is not affiliated*" (POB 2).

- ***Land-use and resource management***

In IDPs, land was considered critical in spatial development. TL1 stated, "*Land redistribution is one of the most challenging tasks*" for traditional leaders. Traditional leaders' greater but highly conflicted access to rural land makes them key stakeholders in plans that depend on land availability. In some instances, they are described as wielding the power to give access to developmental land, while in others, they are considered to be overlooked in land use decisions. They also played a part in the resolution of land disputes, although there are also fears that they sometimes became victims of land access and ownership conflicts:

One of the challenges that is finding expression all over the country is the fights over land ownership. The government post-1994 decided to entrust us with land ownership and re-distribution. We have since encountered many disputes concerning land ownership, and many have lost lives on the course. For us, this is a really sensitive issue (TL2).

A6 mentioned that it was common to

"*find Izinduna installing people in areas designated for other use by the municipality.*"

Thus, land use management as a role came with conflict risks and further relationship damage risks with local authorities, who sometimes claimed equal powers to distribute such land for development.

Theme 2: Capacity challenges faced by traditional leaders in their IDP roles

The second theme looked at traditional leaders' challenges in their attempts to play the roles highlighted under Theme 1. These were presented as subthemes of Theme 2.

- ***Lack of capital budgets to support developmental projects***

Participants discussed a significant challenge they faced was a lack of capital budgets to implement developmental projects in their communities. TL1 stated:

The absence of capital funding for development projects in rural areas is the most significant difficulty we confront. Our areas are still faced with backlogs in terms of water supply, sanitation, housing and other basic services. These are fundamental needs for our communities, which we believe the municipality has to provide in terms of the Constitution (TL1).

TL1, P3 and P7 corroborated this. P7 believed this challenge was due to the non-use of "*ward-based budgets*". A3 associated the problem with rural poverty and the inability of communities to pay rates that are then utilised in capital projects.

Besides the shortage of capital funding, there was also a lack of resources to enable them to execute their daily functions efficiently. It also emerged that a lack of operational resources created communication gaps between traditional leaders and better-resourced political and administrative offices (TL1, TL2). Thus, digital divides hindered their effective coordination of IDP activities with other stakeholders, as highlighted by TL1 below:

I believe that the lack of financial support leads to poor resources and poor working conditions. There is so much that is expected, but we are given limited tools of the trade. Government should extend a hand in ensuring that we are catered with all basic resources, such as mobile phones, data and tablets for consistent communication (TL1).

With IDP participation, implementation, and monitoring, all of the above resources were required, and traditional leaders were incapacitated in exercising their full roles in the process. Financial resource challenges also came with digital gaps that reduced the latter's communication role.

- *Lack of skills and knowledge*

According to the study, one of the challenges faced by traditional leadership is the lack of education and upskilling developmental programmes for traditional leaders in particular (TL1, TL2, A1, A4, A3, P3). The traditional authorities reported that no educational or skills development programmes are meant to assist them in their line of duty. The following are the study participants' perspectives.

I strongly believe that even traditional leaders must be given development opportunities. Traditional leaders are typically found in rural areas where there is a high rate of illiteracy. Some traditional leaders across the province are equally uneducated (TL2).

In the above statement, the skills and knowledge challenges are also traced to illiteracy as a general community challenge in the municipality. Municipal officials acknowledged that much work had been done to help ensure that training reaches all societal leaders, particularly traditional authorities. Nonetheless, the challenge still adversely affected traditional leaders' ability to play "*an oversight role on municipal performance*" (A3).

Broadly, the areas in which they needed skills and knowledge development included: general public administration (A4); performance management (A1, A3); budgeting and financial management (A3); committee participation/leadership (A3); general local government matters (A4, TL1, TL2); and traditional authority (TL1). Interestingly, TL1 highlighted that they also struggled to understand the extent of their authority.

Theme 3: Conflict-driven challenges faced by traditional leaders in their IDP roles

The third theme looked at conflict-driven challenges that traditional leaders faced. Such conflict was with communities, other traditional leaders and municipal political and administrative authorities. These are discussed as subthemes.

- *Power, legitimacy, and safety*

The study learned that most traditional leaders face power, legitimacy, and safety disputes. TL1, TL2 and P8 supported this subtheme. Participants unveiled that there are still disagreements in some provinces about who the "legitimate" traditional leaders are. The

study discovered that it is believed that legitimate leaders are not formally appointed and that some appointed leaders, for example, some headmen, are not lawful. As explained by P8:

In our municipality, we have had major disputes over power and legitimacy, concerning the Kwa-Dube Traditional Authority, where disputes were reported in the media. However, we are relieved that a peaceful solution was found and that stability was preserved with the installation of the new Traditional Leader (P8).

Study participants expressed that disputes over power and legitimacy have been prevalent under the uMhlathuze local municipality, and their safety was not guaranteed. The traditional leaders expressed the view that the killing of traditional leaders has increased tremendously in the country, and this compromises safety:

In general, traditional leadership succession has not always been a smooth process. It is important that traditional leadership must be afforded security because they are not safe. The statistics on killings of traditional authorities have increased immensely (P8).

As implied, conflict redirected focus from IDP and developmental issues to attempts to resolve power and legitimacy problems.

- ***Gatekeeping and politics***

Study participants declared gatekeeping and politics as one of the circumstances that hinder the participation of traditional authorities during integrated development planning proceedings. This was the minimisation or exclusion of traditional leaders' participation in IDPs through intentionally imposed structural and communication barriers. Also, the traditional leaders were afforded token opportunities to participate in IDPs and local governments. They participated ceremoniously rather than strategically and operationally, as stated by TL2:

During the IDP roadshows, traditional leaders are not given the same platform as politically elected councillors. Their attendance is merely that; if they are lucky, they will be given a slot to give words of appreciation, but the actual participation in the programme is always given to councillors. If we are to co-exist, why are we not being afforded an equal opportunity? Even during the handover of projects, sometimes you are just an invitee by the municipality, and the whole ceremony is led by the municipality and no active role by traditional leaders (TL2).

Gatekeeping practices included exclusion practices municipalities used to keep traditional leaders from IDP processes. This also included creating linguistic and process barriers:

We acknowledge and appreciate that when the process begins, Amakhosi is the first structure to be consulted on the formulation of the IDP. As the custodians of culture, we ought to preserve our language, but we often have a challenge in the communication medium used by the municipality. Communication is mostly in the English language, which is not our mother tongue, which we need to preserve as the traditional leaders. Although they try to present in isiZulu during the IDP processes, the documents remain uninterpreted, and then it becomes difficult to read, understand and own what is presented (TL2).

Thus, even when traditional leaders had consultative and advisory roles in IDP outreaches, the reported tokenism and exclusion minimised the value of their contribution. Additionally, this discouraged the latter from active IDP participation.

- *Role conflict and ambiguities with elected officials*

The study participants stated that one of the barriers to traditional leaders' participation in engagements about integrated development plans is the ambiguity of roles and duties for both stakeholders. This is highlighted by the following:

Traditional leaders demanded that traditional authorities be recognised as local government at the primary level, rather than being included in municipalities, after 1994. However, we somehow understood that times had changed, and it was now a more democratic state wherein people chose their leaders. However, the persisting challenge, which leads to inconsistencies in participation of traditional leaders, blurs lines of power as set against the locally elected government (TL1).
In some regions in the province, some tribal authorities do not partake in local government engagements. They do so voluntarily, on the basis that they feel like they have never been entrusted with enough authority post-elections in 1994 (TL2).

Traditional leadership voiced dissatisfaction with their constitutional and legal governing positions. They claim that the Constitution and post-1994 legislation have eroded their position, powers, and functions. They also argue that, like municipalities, the Constitution should have outlined their powers and responsibilities. In conclusion, traditional authorities believe no clear lines separate traditional authority from local government leadership. Study participants argued that this presents obstacles during the integrated development planning processes.

- *Fights over land ownership – overarching conflict*

In rural communities under the traditional leaders' jurisdiction, land was a critical developmental factor of production. Land disputes affected its use in development. Traditional leadership expressed that it is difficult to deal with disputes over land ownership, as some disputes date back many years, and some cases lack sufficient evidence. When asked to comment on the challenges confronting traditional leadership in general, TL1 made the following observations:

Further, we also experience challenges with municipal officials who decide to implement a project in rural areas under the leadership of a ward councillor without any consultation with Izinduna of that area, which often causes conflicts and sometimes leads to project delays: The municipality does not own land in traditional areas, which should be respected (TL1).

Equally, uMhlathuze local municipality officials expressed that land disputes are both sensitive and dangerous for traditional leaders, as in the following statement:

Indeed, land disputes are very problematic. Although it is not very prevalent in our municipality, it is a growing problem across the country, and people lose their lives. Traditional leaders are obliged to tread with extra caution when mediating these matters (P5).

Notably, while TL1, a traditional leader, took land disputes as critical and regular, P5 saw them as a rare occurrence in their community.

Discussion of Findings

The three themes that emerged from the study strongly relate to findings from other settings. For example, Kurebwa (2020) found that traditional leaders played important political liaison roles,

which tended to put them at risk of political partisanship. This finding was made in Zimbabwe and suggests that the challenges faced by the uMhlathuze traditional leadership could be common across Africa.

Traditional leaders' roles in the IDP process

Under Theme 1, it was noted that traditional leaders were engaged in actual rural project implementation, community mobilisation, resources mobilisation and rural land use management. Their roles were classified as:

1. IDP rural-focused developmental input
2. Programme and project implementation role
3. Advocating for urban-rural imbalance removal
4. Encouraging and mobilising community IDP participation
5. Consultative, advisory to municipal councils
6. Rural land use management
7. Political liaison
8. Adoption and finalisation of budgets and plans
9. Resources mobilisation

The above functions resonate with the functions assigned to traditional leaders and their councils under Sections 4 and 20 of the Act. These roles are related to community planning, and developmental and governance needs alongside local, provincial and national government. However, as expressed in the interviews, the political liaison roles are not depicted as part and parcel of traditional leadership under these sections. The Act does not explicitly associate traditional leadership with political functions, although this can be implied from the perspective that municipalities are political formations. Participants' views did not highlight traditional leaders as sidestepping their roles, except for the political aspect discussed in the challenge theme. It is important to note that these duties are not unique, as political and administrative leaders in municipalities also exercise them.

Capacity challenges faced by traditional leaders in their IDP roles

Under Theme 2, the leaders' capacity to influence IDPs was affected by a lack of capital budgets, skills, and knowledge. Such findings were not new, with Mhlanga (2012) coming to a similar conclusion. Of interest, however, is how this problem remains unresolved when it is explicitly provided for legislatively. Section 20(2)(e) of the Act demands that any government structure that engages traditional leaders in any governance and developmental arrangement "strive to ensure that the allocation of a role or function is accompanied by resources and that appropriate measures for accounting for such resources are put in place." This raises the question of whether the local government was capacitating the traditional leadership office enough to enable it to participate in IDP processes effectively. From a conflict perspective, this also raises the conflict of interest challenge. Will local government players be interested in empowering an office they compete with for power and authority?

*Conflict-driven challenges faced by traditional leaders in their IDP roles*

Under Theme 3, it is notable that traditional leaders faced several challenges in their attempts to legitimately include IDP processes, which were directly or indirectly linked to conflict. Power, legitimacy, and safety issues were a challenge within the traditional system, where current leaders found themselves defending their legitimacy to internal rivals, a matter also discussed by Mustasilta (2021). The latter adds that instabilities created in such power struggles directly affected the stability of the local municipality. Further, internal conflict affected the time and effort they devoted to actual IDP roles.

Also under Theme 3, traditional leaders expressed dissatisfaction with their constitutional and legal governing positions, which they saw as weak compared to those of the municipal authorities. This view is widely discussed in the literature. Scholars like Mhlanga (2012) saw this as a conflict for recognition and power rather than a pure need for adequate power for developmental purposes. Nonetheless, the view that the constitutional and legislative systems created this role conflict is well supported (Reddy et al., 2023).

The conflict view of IDPS

Overall, the findings show the sub-optimised role of traditional leaders in IDP processes. This is regardless of their important consultative, advocacy and advisory roles, as shown under Theme 1. Inspired by conflict theory thinking, the researchers narrow the traditional leadership's challenges into a conflict driven by plural interests in local governance among three major local forces: the traditional leaders, ward councillors and municipal administrators. This conflict is mapped in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Conflict driven by plural interests in local governance.
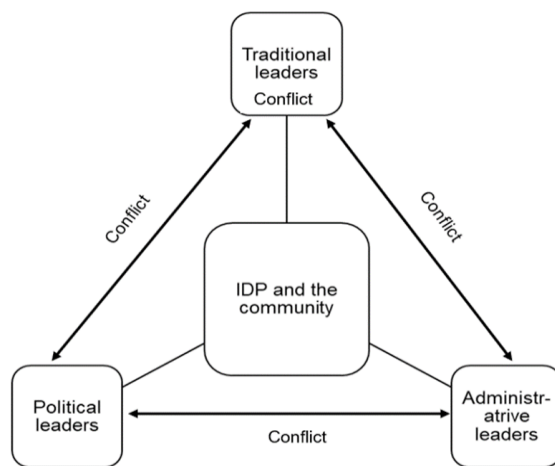
Source: Authors' construction (2024)

The above view shows that traditional leaders' contribution to IDP processes is affected by conflicted relationships between three leading power players, who are all attempting to influence IDP outcomes simultaneously, based on the analysed data. These are: the traditional leaders, political leaders, and administrative leaders within the municipality. Internal conflict within the traditional leadership ranks was associated with fights over titles, with several persons claiming to be legitimate traditional leaders, as outlined under the power, legitimacy, and safety subtheme. This internal conflict occurred concurrently with traditional leaders' conflict with political leaders who sometimes exerted their projects without the latter's approval. Further, under the role conflict and ambiguities with elected officials' subtheme, mere power struggles are seen as playing a part in the conflict between traditional leaders and elected officials. Conflict with the municipal administration was highlighted as significant in land issues (fights over land ownership subtheme). In the findings, there is also a conflict between democracy and tradition, as mentioned by TL1, and this hinged on the view that traditional leadership might have lost relevance over time.

As highlighted in the findings, traditional leaders exercised the above duties while facing financial, skills, and knowledge capacity-related challenges (Theme 2). The other conflict parties (politicians and municipal administrators) are not mentioned as facing similar challenges. This put traditional leaders at a severe disadvantage, noting that what they lacked was critical in influencing local government and IDP processes.

In the findings, the political selectivity of traditional leaders was considered to be against the Acts, section 20(1)(i) that commands the office not to make politically referenced decisions, especially on resource allocation (South African Government, 2003b). Furthermore, conflicts affecting the roles of traditional leaders cannot be viewed in isolation. It is part of systemic conflict occurring among three local government leadership domains – elected ward councillors represent politicians, municipal administrators are appointed leaders, and the traditional leaders are themselves. From the findings, local government is a multi-leadership environment that becomes even more complex when traditional leadership are involved.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the findings above, the study recommended short and long-term solutions to the challenges affecting traditional leaders in local government, particularly in UMhlathuze Municipality.

- In the short term, the study recommends that provincial and national governments work together to ensure that traditional leaders are capacitated and empowered (regarding skills, knowledge and budgets) to contribute to IDPs. Their engagement should be considered an auditable activity that must be annually monitored and evaluated. This is highlighted in the uMhlathuze Municipality, where they represent the least empowered of the three leadership circles. Furthermore, a standing conflict management committee that represents traditional leaders and the municipality's political and administrative components should be implemented to find a sustainable balance between these parties' conflicting needs in IDPs.

- In the long term, the national government needs to re-examine the leadership structure of areas classified as communal under the authority of ward councillors and traditional leaders. The feasibility of merging political and traditional leadership in such communities and wards should be openly explored. This should focus on moving towards a system where traditional or political leaders (and not both) represent such communities in municipal councils.

Additionally, the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, in collaboration with the uMhlathuze Municipality, should conduct a skills audit for traditional leaders. The skills audit results will inform the training and development needs that have to be rolled out for traditional leaders. Legislative amendments (specifically changes to the Local Government Municipal Structures Act) that recognise and demarcate the roles of traditional leaders versus those of councillors should be enacted. These should also specify traditional leaders' specific IDP roles.

Declarations

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