



Exploring the extent of community involvement in the implementation of the indigent policy in Nkomazi Local Municipality



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Dates:

Received: 12 Nov. 2025

Accepted: 20 Feb. 2026

Published: 23 Apr. 2026

How to cite this article:

Khoza, H.H. & Mukonza, R.M., 2026, 'Exploring the extent of community involvement in the implementation of the indigent policy in Nkomazi Local Municipality', *Africa's Public Service Delivery and Performance Review* 14(1), a996. <https://doi.org/10.4102/apsdpr.v14i1.996>

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Background: Policies, strategies and plans of most South African municipalities are not aligned with the realities and interests of communities and do not consider the disadvantaged backgrounds of communities, with planned services delivered in specific municipalities not satisfying the poverty level and the interests of the local people. Such an act contributes to many policies designed in South Africa failing to fulfil their intended objectives.

Aim: This study explores the extent of community involvement in the implementation of the indigent policy to assess its efficiency in meeting the intended objectives.

Setting: The study is based on the Nkomazi Local Municipality (NLM), Mpumalanga province. The study focused on community involvement in the implementation of indigent policy, involving NLM key informant officials and community members within the NLM jurisdiction.

Methods: The study employed a mixed-method approach that combines quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Data were collected through a closed-ended questionnaire and structured interviews. The Thematic and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences was utilised for data analysis.

Results: The findings reveal poor community consultation efforts across all four community wards (Malelane, Hectorspruit, Magogeni and Boschfontein), indicating widespread uncertainty regarding consultation processes on the implementation of the indigent policy.

Conclusion: Limited community involvement in the implementation of the indigent policy is likely to undermine policy legitimacy and subsequent policy implementation effectiveness.

Contribution: This study provides recommendations on how municipalities can enforce a community involvement perspective by involving different stakeholders who can collaborate to achieve effective service delivery for the vulnerable communities, as required in terms of the municipal indigent policy.

Keywords: community involvement; community participation; community engagement; indigent policy; decision-making.

Introduction

Local governance in South Africa is shaped by various legislative frameworks and policy documents aimed at enhancing transparency, accountability, productivity and responsibility within the local government sphere (De Villiers & Kalema 2005:80). The National Framework for Municipal Indigent Policies issued a guiding document as a source of reference for the development and implementation of municipal indigent policies, with the intent to eradicate poverty and eliminate service delivery backlog in municipalities through providing access to basic services to the vulnerable community (Alers 2022; Naidoo 2010; Republic of South Africa 2005). These policies mandate that municipal services comply with the requirements established in the Constitution (Republic of South Africa 1996), which explicitly empowers and mandates municipalities to prioritise community involvement in development and to ensure effective, sustainable service delivery. This is strengthened in Section 152, which encourages the involvement of communities and community organisations in matters of local government (Republic of South Africa 1996).

Furthermore, *the Municipal Systems Act* (Republic of South Africa 2000) requires municipalities to develop a culture of municipal governance that complements formal representative government with a system of participatory governance, and to create mechanisms, processes and procedures for

community participation in key areas such as the preparation of the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), the budget and strategic decisions relating to service provision (Manyaka & Madzivhandila 2013). This is supplemented by Rijal (2023:84), who confirms that community involvement serves as a key principle in democratic and participatory governance, creating a government that is more transparent, accountable, inclusive and responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people. Furthermore, Pycroft (1996:232) submits that public policies emerge as responses to community needs, necessitating the involvement of all stakeholders during their development. From the above background, it is rational to deduce that public policies stem from the needs presented by communities. Thus, achieving policy objectives hinges on the active involvement of those affected by such policies during their development, implementation and evaluation.

By providing a platform for involvement, stakeholders and communities gain a deeper understanding of the policy and its practical applications, ultimately aligning with the overall goals intended to address the challenges and needs articulated by the affected individuals. It is, however, significant that service delivery reflects community needs that are communicated through the IDP process. Despite these notable objectives set by the Constitution on community involvement, municipalities have failed to live up to the aims of the Constitution (Tshoose 2015). This is professed through the government's negligence in acting in the interests of the community, partly because of adopting practices which neglect the involvement of communities in issues affecting them as required in terms of democratic values (Tshoose 2015). Also, it has been acknowledged that the policies, strategies and plans of most South African municipalities are not aligned with the realities and interests of the local constituencies and do not consider the disadvantaged backgrounds of the people in the communities, with planned services delivered in specific municipalities not satisfying the poverty level and the interests of the local people (Mashamba 2008). This could mean that local decisions are made and implemented outside the consultation and involvement of the local constituencies affected in the area. This is because municipalities are unwilling or unable to share decision-making power with communities (Petunia & Selepe 2020).

The primary issue is that existing mechanisms are often geared towards merely seeking community input on already formulated policy responses or predetermined projects, rather than engaging them in the initial needs analysis and planning phases. Such an act by municipalities contributes to many policies designed in South Africa failing to fulfil their promises and intended objectives, contributing to pervasive dissatisfaction within communities and exacerbating poverty levels caused by inadequate service delivery (Khoza & Mukonza 2024; Managa 2012:2). It is evident that the South African government excels at policy formulation yet exhibits a poor track record in implementation and practice (Khoza & Mukonza 2024). Such an act frustrates the efforts of South Africans to achieve community development, poverty

alleviation and good governance (Seopetsa 2020). Nkuna and Nemutanzhela (2012) second the above motion and submit that the issue of poverty in SA is exacerbated by inequality, despite pro-poor policies.

Participatory democracy theory

The participatory democracy theory, also known as a citizen participation theory, is the theory that underpins and confirms the undertaking of the study. As cited in Ochoa (2008:7), this theory stems from the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who presented the argument that authority over a people can only be legitimate if it leaves those who it governs as free as they were prior to their submitting to that authority. Thus, participatory democracy grants individuals the ability to participate in 'making' the laws they must obey (Ochoa 2008). The theory of participatory democracy underscores the critical significance of community engagement in the formulation of policies that impact their lives and promotes a governance model that is more democratic and accountable, as it encourages active involvement from citizens (Petunia & Selepe 2020). This theory argues that community participation is the direction and operation of a political system. Accordingly, Fillet (2024) submits that this theory promotes a governance system that enables community members to participate directly in decision-making, where they can provide input or feedback on decisions or policies affecting their lives. This theory fosters a more engaged and informed community, ensuring diverse voices are heard and considered in policy formation.

The importance of inclusive policy-making is corroborated by Davids, Theron and Maphunye (2005) and Mayekiso, Taylor and Maphazi (2013), who emphasise that communities should engage actively as participants, voters and catalysts for their development. This theory is relevant in exploring and establishing the extent of community involvement in the implementation of the indigent policy in Nkomazi Local Municipality (NLM) to assess its efficiency in meeting the intended objectives. This is because the theory promotes the involvement of community members in all policy decisions that affect their lives. Thus, it is significant to note that limited engagement in policy implementation leads to policy alienation, in which the policies adopted and implemented may partly address the needs raised in communities, and the intended beneficiaries neither understand nor relate to the programme (Matlala & Makhubela 2019). Fillet (2024) notes that the key elements of participatory democracy include active community involvement, regular community meetings, digital platforms for wider engagement and emphasis on transparency and inclusivity.

An overview of indigent policies

According to the People's Assembly (2025) and Desai and Maluleke (2022), South Africa adopted an indigent policy in 2001, intended to provide free basic services (FBS) as a means of helping poorer households that would receive free or partially subsidised services. Contrarily, Mathebula (2014) argues that indigent policies in South Africa were adopted

when the South African new dispensation was confronted with the challenges of providing services to previously disadvantaged groups at the beginning of democracy, observing that this nature encouraged the need for the government to introduce policies that could be used to compensate for the injustices created by the apartheid government, which, among others, involved the development of the indigent policy in municipalities. Manyaka (2014:128) acknowledges that the success of the new local government system is dependent largely on the availability of financial resources. Nonetheless, municipalities were confronted with various challenges ranging from the apartheid government, including providing services identified as basic human rights, to acting as a point of delivery for different services (De Villiers & Kalema 2005:78).

The Nkomazi Local Municipality (2017), maintains that indigent policies promote that the poor households whose living status is below average, identified as indigent, have access to essential (basic) service packages, which include water, electricity, refuse removal and sanitation. Equally, the Department of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG) (Republic of South Africa 2005) asserts that a municipal indigent policy has long been viewed as a framework essential for the promotion of FBS delivery and alleviation of poverty for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in communities. Khoza and Mukonza (2024:101) and Statistics South Africa (Republic of South Africa 2014) observe that indigent policies are 'tools of intervention to alleviate the plight of poverty and to encourage indigent households to live within affordable consumption levels'. It has been suggested that the indigent policy ensures that municipalities have sufficient funding to fulfil their responsibilities in providing basic services to indigents (Republic of South Africa 2005). Accordingly, the Nkomazi Local Municipality (2017) and Mathebula (2014), the indigent policy serves as a crucial tool for addressing inequality and providing a safety net for the poor and vulnerable in South Africa. Equally, the State of the Nation Address (SONA 2024) asserts that the government is providing access to grants to indigent people as part of an extensive social security net to eradicate poverty and hunger, and to mitigate the worst effects of poverty.

In the President's debate of parliament opening, the President pledged to improve South African municipalities to deliver quality basic services to poorer communities and to strengthen and improve the implementation of indigent policies so that the elderly, the infirm, and the poor can receive assistance with the payment of basic services (SONA 2024). The improved implementation of indigent policies in South African municipalities forms part of reducing the cost of living. Furthermore, De Villiers and Kalema (2005:82) identify the responsibilities of municipalities as implementing socioeconomic development and the provision of water, electricity, sewerage and refuse removal, and are charged to improve the living standards within their areas of jurisdiction through expanded service delivery and guiding development activities. Consequently, every municipality must have its

own database or register for indigents. This will help in identifying the accurate indigents entitled to municipal benefits. To emphasise the clarity of indigents, Ndunda, Ngahu and Wanyoike (2015) explain that indigent households are those that are exempted from paying municipal taxes and levies because of their significant poverty and unemployment levels. In addition, such people are, in terms of the local government's FBS policy, supposed to receive government services for free without any expectation that they should pay for municipal services (Manyaka 2014:136; Republic of South Africa 2024).

Aim and purpose of the indigent policy

The primary aim of the indigent policy in terms of the national framework on indigent policies is to ensure the inclusion of households that are unable to afford municipal basic services. The DPLG (Republic of South Africa 2004:14) indicates that the policy provides a funding framework to enable municipalities to meet their constitutional responsibility of delivering basic services to indigent households. Several scholars and institutions, including SERI (2013), Mamusa Local Municipality (Republic of South Africa 2018) and Naidoo (2010), emphasise that the policy supports local government in fulfilling its obligation to provide FBS as entrenched in the Bill of Rights. Alers (2022) further views the indigent policy as a mechanism for promoting equitable access to limited FBS within the local government sphere. Given that many poor households in South Africa struggle to access affordable and adequate services, the indigent policy serves as a social safety net by enabling municipalities to deliver free or subsidised basic services to qualifying households while distinguishing those who can afford to pay (Mashamba 2008; Republic of South Africa 2023). The policy also seeks to promote social and economic development, prevent the exclusion of low-income households from essential services and reduce the financial burden on municipalities arising from non-payment Nkomazi Local Municipality 2023; Nkomazi Local Municipality 2024 and Midvaal Local Municipality 2023.

Unpacking the concept of community involvement

According to Rijal (2023), community involvement is important in policy and decision-making and cannot be ignored. The Constitution establishes local government as a sphere that operates closest to the people, with a primary mandate to be responsive to the needs of the community and to facilitate their active participation in the decisions that affect their lives (Mudzusi, Munzhedzi & Mahole 2024). The Batho Pele White Paper (Republic of South Africa 1997), as highlighted by Mubangizi and Tshishong (2013:311), aims to empower communities and promote participatory principles, such as consultation, access, transparency and accountability in service delivery. Similarly, Tshoose (2015) submits that community involvement has to do with inclusiveness, openness, access, consultation, shared decisions and transparency in the affairs that directly or indirectly affect the communities at the grassroots.

Accordingly, Tshoose (2015) deduces that public participation plays a significant role in the development of an open, participatory and accountable governance model. This is strengthened in Cloete and De Coning (2011:91), who argue that popular participation entails the creation of opportunities that enable all members of the community and the larger society to actively contribute to and influence the development process and to share equitably in the fruits of development. If the community is effectively engaged and involved in processes and decisions affecting their development, it is likely that the decisions taken, and community projects implemented will yield the desired outcomes that largely benefit the whole community and bear the fruits of improved economic growth. Gaventa and Barrett (2012) support the idea and expand to say that meaningful community participation requires multi-channel communication to reach marginalised populations effectively.

The significance of community involvement in planning, policy and decision-making

According to Rijal (2023:84–85) and Petunia and Selepe (2020), the importance of community involvement in public planning, policy and decision-making processes can be highlighted from several perspectives:

- **Legitimacy and Accountability:** Community involvement increases the legitimacy of public decisions because the resulting policies and programmes reflect the actual needs, aspirations and interests of the affected communities. In addition, community involvement also provides an opportunity for the government to be directly accountable to its citizens, as the process becomes more transparent, equitable, open and fair.
- **Efficiency and Effectiveness:** By involving communities in planning, policy and decision-making, potential problems and challenges that may go undetected by internal parties can be identified earlier, as community problems stem from the community and should arise from the voices of the community. This prevents wastage of resources and ensures that decisions are better targeted and provide greater benefits to the community.
- **Innovation and Creativity:** Community involvement brings a variety of ideas and views from diverse backgrounds, resulting in more innovative and creative solutions to public problems. Citizen participation can also trigger the potential of local human resources and build local capabilities to address their own problems.
- **Community Empowerment:** Through active involvement in planning, policy and decision-making processes, communities become more empowered and feel responsible for development and public services. This can increase community participation in social and political activities, which in turn improves the quality of democracy.
- **Conflict Reduction and Increased Community Satisfaction:** Community involvement can help identify and resolve potential conflicts that arise from different views or interests. By considering various perspectives, decisions can reflect greater consensus and can increase the level of public satisfaction with the government.

Research methodology

This study is empirical in nature, and it employed a mixed-method research approach, comprising qualitative and quantitative research methods to explore the extent of community involvement in the implementation of the indigent policy and to assess its efficiency in meeting the intended objectives. Andersson, Boateng and Abos (2024) describe mixed-method research as a research approach that combines qualitative and quantitative techniques to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research questions outlined in the study. The target population of this study involves the NLM officials (key informants) and the community members serving as the beneficiaries of the indigent policy. A sample size of 378 (nine NLM officials and 369 community members) was selected and confirmed based on the purposive and stratified random sampling methods to capture both the policy implementers' and the beneficiaries' perspectives on exploring the extent of community involvement in the implementation of the indigent policy in NLM.

Structured interviews with closed-ended questions were employed to collect data from the NLM municipal mayor, municipal manager, four ward councillors and three indigent officials. Also, a structured, closed-ended questionnaire was employed to collect data from the NLM community members in four areas, organised as 99 members in Boschfontein, 85 members in Malelane, 85 members in Hectorspruit and 100 members in Magogeni. Structured interviews were used for NLM officials to allow in-depth clarification, while questionnaires were used for community members to efficiently collect standardised data from a larger group.

Data analysis adopted in the study

The data analysis procedures adopted in this study were informed by the mixed-method research design, which integrated both qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of the indigent policy in NLM. The qualitative data collected were analysed using thematic analysis, which provided a systematic and rigorous framework for identifying, organising and interpreting patterns of meaning across the dataset, through the examination of the experiences, perceptions and institutional practices related to the implementation of the indigent policy in NLM. The thematic analysis process followed a structured, multistage procedure including data preparation, familiarisation, open coding (in Atlas.ti), thematic development, data triangulation and interpretation and narrative construction, presenting the steps as a staircase leading from raw data to interpretive narratives (Squires 2023).

The quantitative component of this study complemented the qualitative analysis by providing measurable patterns, trends and associations within the dataset. This component focused on summarising and examining responses from structured questionnaires administered to community members in NLM. Responses from officials were excluded

from the quantitative analysis because officials' data were analysed qualitatively to capture in-depth insights about policy implementation, ensuring that each group's data was assessed using the method most appropriate for their role and perspective. The quantitative data were first captured in Microsoft Excel and subsequently exported to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24.0 for analysis. The analysis employed descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations to explore relationships between key variables relevant to the implementation and effectiveness of the indigent policy. This approach was chosen to provide a clear statistical overview of participant characteristics, service delivery perceptions and policy experiences, thereby reinforcing and contextualising the qualitative findings. To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, methodological triangulation was employed. Results from the qualitative analysis were compared and integrated with quantitative findings to corroborate evidence and provide a more nuanced understanding of the research problem. This approach allowed for convergence and divergence between different data sources to be systematically examined, strengthening the overall interpretations. The analysed data are presented in tables, graphs and bar charts, displaying frequencies and percentages of responses.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Tshwane University of Technology, Research Ethics Committee. The ethical clearance number is FCRE/PM/STD/2018/34. Compliance with standards of research involving humans was maintained in the study. The researcher considered the issues of ethics and confidentiality of the information provided by participants.

Presentation, interpretation and analysis

This study, drawn from a Doctor of Public Affairs (PhD) thesis, explores the extent of community involvement in the implementation of the indigent policy to assess its efficiency in meeting the intended objectives. This section on presentation, interpretation and analysis provides a road map and an outline of qualitative and quantitative data collected from the selected respondents. The study respondents were surveyed to determine whether community members were involved in the formulation and implementation of the indigent policy in NLM, based on community experiences and perceptions.

Community awareness

Community awareness of the indigent policy is a key indicator of how effectively the NLM engages its residents during policy implementation. High levels of awareness, coupled with the channels used to disseminate information, reflect the municipality's efforts in fostering meaningful community involvement in the policy process. Figure 1 illustrates the level of awareness among community members.

Figure 1 presents the aggregated responses of participants from all four study areas regarding their awareness of the indigent policy. Most of the respondents, 173 (46.88%), indicated that they agree that they are aware of the indigent policy. A further eight (2.17%) strongly agreed, bringing the total proportion of respondents who expressed some level of awareness to just under 50%. However, a substantial proportion of 98 (26.56%) disagreed, expressed a lack of awareness of the indigent policy, and 84 (22.76%) strongly disagreed with the statement, together representing nearly half of the total respondents (approximately 49%). Only a small fraction of six (1.63%) participants selected 'not certain', indicating limited ambiguity among respondents; most held a clear position regarding their awareness level.

Awareness campaign strategies

Figure 2 presents the distribution of the communication channels used to raise awareness of the indigent policy as reported by community members across the four study wards, namely: Hectorspruit, Malelane, Magogeni and Boschfontein.

Figure 2 presents the overall distribution of communication channels used to raise awareness of indigent policy across all four wards. The most frequently cited channel is television, accounting for 160 (43.36%) responses. This is followed by community radio or newspaper, which is used by 94 (25.47%), indicating that mass media platforms play a central role in disseminating information about the indigent policy when data from all wards are aggregated. Several 43 (11.65%)

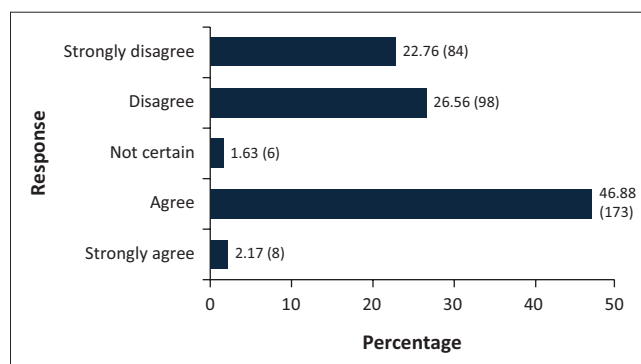


FIGURE 1: Community awareness of the indigent support programme.

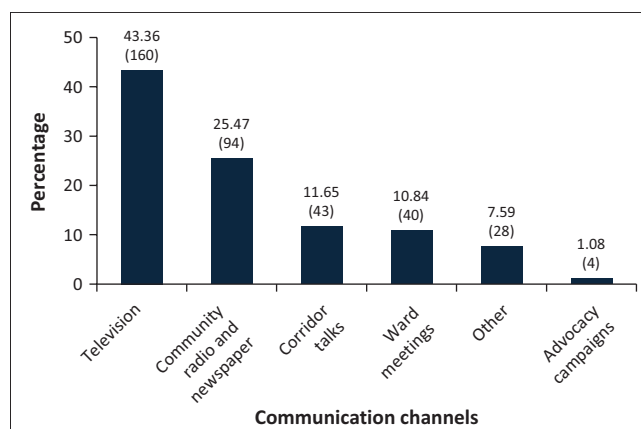


FIGURE 2: Channels used to raise awareness of the indigent policy.

respondents agreed on the use of Corridor talk, and 40 (10.84%) respondents agreed on the use of ward meetings channels, highlighting the importance of informal interpersonal networks and community forums in complementing mass media communication. Although these channels are less prominent overall, they remain significant at the ward level, particularly in places like Hectorspruit, Magogeni and Boschfontein, where direct community interaction is an important mode of communication.

The 'Other' category presents 28 (7.59%) respondents who agree to the use of sources such as the internet and workplace information, suggesting that alternative communication platforms are used by a smaller segment of respondents. A few respondents, 4 (1.08%), agree that advocacy campaigns are the least reported channel overall, indicating limited use of structured, targeted awareness drives across the municipality. Many community members are not aware of the indigent policy because of the municipality's insufficient efforts in raising awareness, and the municipality is mostly dependent on communicating the indigent policy on a television, which cannot reach many households as a result of unaffordability, rather than using most effective tools such as community outreach that can reach even the local households that are not affording a television.

Community consultation during indigent policy formulation

Community consultation is the *sine qua non* for effective policy formulation. To assess the policy formulation process, this study assessed community involvement during the formulation of the indigent policy. The analysis also explores residents' awareness of the policy, their perceptions of its effectiveness and the relationship between consultation and satisfaction with the programme content.

Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of community responses, expressed as percentages, regarding the extent to which they were consulted during the formulation of the indigent policy, disaggregated by wards (Hectorspruit, Malelane, Magogeni and Boschfontein).

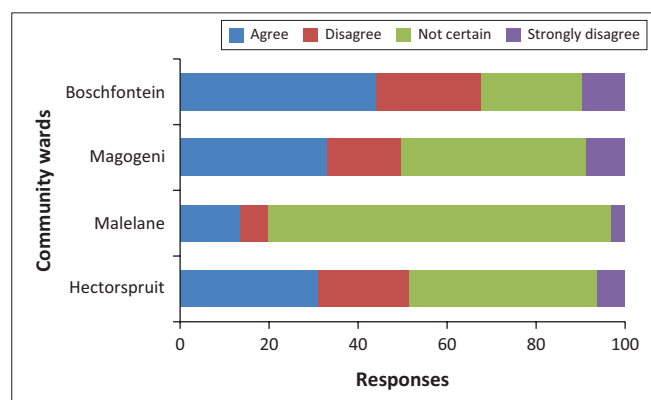


FIGURE 3: Community perceptions of consultation during the formulation of the indigent policy across four community wards.

Across all four wards, the 'Not certain' category dominates, indicating widespread uncertainty or lack of awareness regarding consultation processes. In Malelane, for example, *Not certain* responses constitute approximately 83% of all responses, with only 11% agreeing, 5% disagreeing and 1% strongly disagreeing. This indicates that the vast majority of respondents in this ward were either unaware of any consultation processes or could not recall participating in them. In Hectorspruit, 48% of respondents indicated *Not certain*, while 31% agreed, 15% disagreed and 6% strongly disagreed. Compared to the other wards, Hectorspruit shows a slightly higher level of reported agreement, although uncertainty remains predominant. This suggests that some consultation activities may have taken place but were not sufficiently broad-based to reach all residents. In Magogeni, *Not certain* responses account for 62%, followed by 23% agreement, 10% disagreement and 5% strong disagreement. The high proportion of uncertainty again points to weak or poorly communicated consultation efforts. Similarly, in Boschfontein, 50% of respondents selected *Not certain*, while 35% agreed, 10% disagreed and 5% strongly disagreed, suggesting slightly higher levels of perceived engagement compared to Malelane and Magogeni, but still with consultation not reaching half of the population.

As a result, consultation was largely procedural rather than substantive, aligning with the lower rungs of participation, where communities were informed or superficially consulted but had limited influence over decision-making. This is supported by the high proportion of 'Not certain' responses across all wards, indicating that most residents either were unaware of consultation processes or could not recall participating in them. Even where some agreement was reported, the consultation did not appear to reach the majority of residents, highlighting gaps in the depth and inclusiveness of engagement.

The data in Figure 4 indicate notable differences in how residents perceive community consultation during the formulation of the indigent policy, based on whether they are identified as indigent households or not. A significantly higher proportion of respondents from indigent households (22.2%) strongly disagreed, while 11.1% disagreed with the notion that community members were consulted, compared

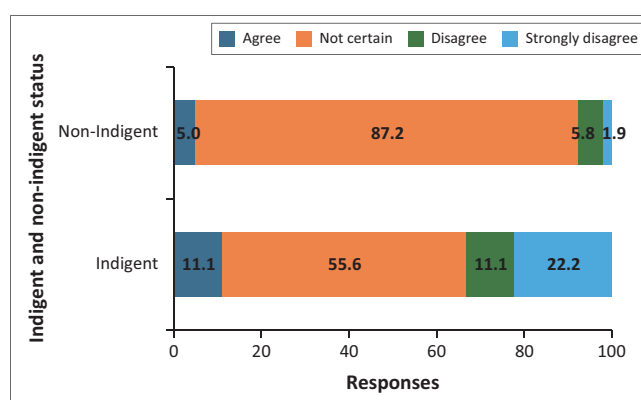


FIGURE 4: Indigent and non-indigent households' responses to consultation on indigent policy.

to only 1.9% and 5.8%, respectively, who do not consider themselves indigent. Conversely, most respondents who do not identify as indigent (87.2%) were 'Not certain' about community consultation, compared to 55.6% of indigent respondents. These differences suggest that residents' socioeconomic status influences perceptions of community involvement.

The Chi-Square test results (Table 1) confirm a statistically significant association between perceived community consultation and indigent household status (Pearson Chi-Square = 16.868, $p < 0.001$). The Pearson Chi-Square value (16.868) represents the extent to which the observed distribution of responses differs from what would be expected if there were no relationship between the two variables. The p -value ($p < 0.001$) indicates that this association is highly unlikely to be because of chance, providing strong evidence of a meaningful relationship between perceived community consultation and indigent household status.

This means that how residents view their involvement in the policymaking process significantly depends on whether they are identified as indigent or not. The study revealed that community consultation in the formulation of the indigent policy was limited and unevenly perceived by residents. While official records and some respondents acknowledged that consultation took place through meetings, IDP forums and traditional leaders, a substantial proportion of residents (86.4%) indicated uncertainty about whether they were ever consulted. This lack of clarity contributed to mixed levels of satisfaction with the policy content. For example, many respondents who were unsure about the consultation process also expressed uncertainty about the policy's relevance and benefits, highlighting the link between consultation, awareness and satisfaction.

Community education on the indigent policy

Figure 5 reveals that across all wards, 'Not at all' dominates overwhelmingly, indicating that most respondents perceive that the municipality does not conduct community education or awareness activities regarding the indigent policy. This trend is particularly striking in Boschfontein, where nearly 95% of respondents selected *Not at all*, and in Malelane, where approximately 90% reported the same. Similarly, in Hectorspruit, about 78% of respondents indicated *Not at all*, and in Magogeni, this response accounted for around 58% of responses. In contrast, responses indicating any level of municipal education activity (*More often*, *Once in a while*, and *Sometimes*) were very low across all wards.

TABLE 1: Chi-Square tests for community consultation and indigent household status.

Test	Value	df	Asymptotic significance (two-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	16.868	3	< 0.001
Likelihood ratio	7.638	3	0.054
Linear-by-linear association	6.726	1	0.010

df, degrees of freedom.

approximately 28% reported *Once in a while* and 10% *Sometimes*, indicating some intermittent education efforts. Hectorspruit also displayed a small proportion of respondents (approximately 15%) who perceived activities as happening *Once in a while*, while Boschfontein and Malelane recorded negligible proportions in all categories other than *Not at all*.

Analysis of data collected through interviews

Thematic analysis of key informant interviews identified three main themes regarding the implementation of the indigent policy in NLM:

Theme 1: Policy formulation rooted in legislation and planning

Key informants consistently noted that the indigent policy was aligned with national legislation and local development planning. For example, one interviewee stated:

'The indigent policy in NLM was formulated in line with the *Municipal Systems Act* and the national *Free Basic Services framework*. We began with a needs assessment to understand the extent of poverty and service backlogs in the municipality. The policy was then aligned with our *Integrated Development Plan (IDP)* to ensure it directly supported sustainable service delivery.' (Participant 5, Male, 47 years old, ward-councilor)

Responding to the communication channels used. One key informant admitted these shortcomings, stating:

'Many households know about the indigent policy in general terms, but very few understand the details of how it works or who qualifies. Our communication has often been one-way, through ward meetings or notices, and this has left gaps in awareness.' (Participant 4, Female, 43 years old, Indigent Officer [Supervisor])

Theme 2: Communication and awareness gaps

Most key informants acknowledged that awareness campaigns relied heavily on mass media, such as television and community radio, with supplementary ward meetings and informal channels. However, gaps remained in reaching all community members, particularly in rural areas. As one participant explained:

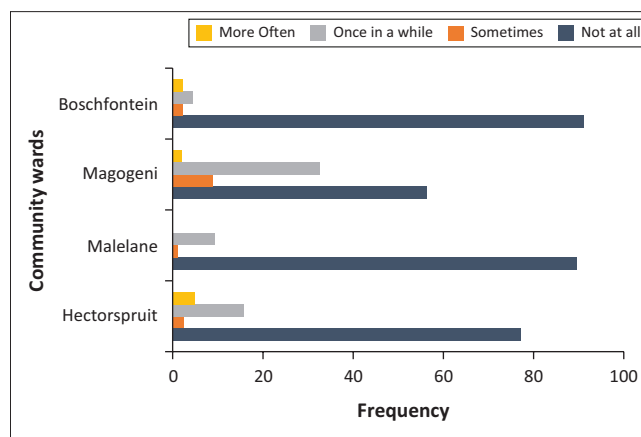


FIGURE 5: Community perceptions of the frequency of municipal community education activities on the indigent policy across four wards.

'Most of our communication about the indigent policy is done through television and community radio because these platforms reach a wide audience quickly. However, we also rely a lot on ward meetings and community interactions, especially in areas where people may not have easy access to media. Informal channels, like corridor talks, often help spread the message even further. We haven't really done many structured advocacy campaigns, which is something we still need to strengthen.' (Participant 7, Male, 42 years old, ward-councilor)

Theme 3: Limited and uneven community consultation

Key informants reported that consultation processes were conducted, but their reach and inclusivity were limited. One participant observed:

'Community consultation was part of the process, but many residents still felt left out. We mainly relied on community meetings, which did not always reach everyone. Some people expected more direct involvement, and this has affected how the policy is perceived.' (Participant 1, Male, 49 years old, Indigent Manager)

Further, while all key informants agreed on the importance of community education, they differed in their views on the methods used and the reach of these efforts. Qualitative analysis revealed that residents remained uncertain about the policy's details and application, indicating gaps in the depth and inclusiveness of education campaigns. For example, one key informant explained:

'We have tried to educate the community about the indigent policy through campaigns, mostly at ward meetings and IDP forums. These platforms allow us to speak directly to residents, but they do not always reach everyone, especially those in rural villages. We need to expand our campaigns to other media so that no one is left behind.' (Participant 2, Female, 50 years old, Municipal mayor)

This highlights the procedural nature of engagement and the challenges in achieving substantive, inclusive participation.

Discussion

Community awareness of the indigent policy is a key indicator of how effectively the NLM engages its residents during policy implementation. High levels of awareness, coupled with the channels used to disseminate information, reflect the municipality's efforts in fostering meaningful community involvement in the policy process. The findings of the study reveal that approximately 49% of the respondents disagree that awareness was raised by NLM regarding the indigent policy, which signifies they either lack awareness or are misinformed. This widespread disagreement undermines one of the core objectives of the indigent policy: public participation and empowerment. Without meaningful consultation, citizens are unlikely to understand policy benefits, criteria or procedures for inclusion. The limited awareness also suggests that communication channels, mainly radio, television and occasional ward meetings, have not effectively reached vulnerable groups, particularly in rural areas such as Magogeni and Boschfontein. This is

substantiated in the People's Assembly (2025), wherein it is argued that a substantial number of poor households remain unregistered as indigents, resulting in low uptake of the FBS programme as a result of limited awareness, contributed by inadequate awareness-raising campaigns and communication strategies by municipalities.

The results revealed that mass media channels, especially television and community radio or newspapers, dominate overall communication efforts for indigent policy awareness when data are aggregated across wards. However, the presence of corridor talks and ward meetings, even at lower aggregate levels, underscores their continued relevance in community-level communication, aligning with ward-specific results where these channels were more prominent in particular communities (e.g., corridor talks in Hectorspruit and ward meetings in Magogeni and Boschfontein). The limited use of advocacy campaigns reflects a potential gap in strategic, targeted outreach by the municipality, while the 'other' category points to emerging but still marginal alternative communication methods. The key informant's statement on the interviews conducted reinforces the predominant reliance on mass media channels, particularly television and community radio, as the primary means of disseminating information about the indigent policy. This observation is consistent with the quantitative findings, which indicate that television (43.36%) and community radio or newspaper (25.47%) collectively account for the majority of awareness-raising channels across the four wards. By highlighting these platforms as the main communication tools, the officer underscores the municipality's strategic focus on broad-reach, cost-effective media to inform the public.

The findings reveal poor community consultation efforts across all four community wards, where the 'Not certain' category dominates, showing approximately 83% of all responses in Malelane, 48% in Hectorspruit, 62% in Magogeni and 50% in Boschfontein, indicating widespread uncertainty or lack of awareness regarding consultation processes on the implementation of the indigent policy. This contradicts the literature by Davids et al. (2005) and Mayekiso et al. (2013), which emphasises that the policymaking process must remain inclusive, allowing communities to engage actively as participants, voters and catalysts for their development. Also, the findings from the qualitative data reflect the limitations of relying primarily on community meetings as a communication and consultation strategy, which excludes residents unable to attend because of work, distance or other constraints. The findings, therefore, suggest that while consultation mechanisms were in place, they may not have been sufficiently inclusive or meaningful to foster broad community ownership of the indigent policy.

It is significant to note that effective policy formulation involves educating communities about the policy, how it works and who is eligible for support programmes. One strategy to build awareness is through education campaigns.

High levels of education campaigns reflect the municipality's efforts in fostering meaningful community involvement in the policy process. However, the findings of the study reveal that across all wards, 'Not at all' dominates overwhelmingly, indicating that most respondents perceive that the municipality does not conduct community education or awareness activities regarding the indigent policy.

Recommendations

A key recommendation emerging from this study is the need to enhance community participation in the formulation and implementation of indigent policies. The findings revealed that although NLM reported consultation with ward councillors, committees and traditional leaders, most residents expressed uncertainty about whether they were meaningfully involved in policy processes. This disconnect highlights the limited inclusivity of the consultation mechanisms employed. To address these shortcomings, municipalities should adopt a more diversified and interactive approach to community engagement. Community radio, which already serves as an important source of information in rural areas, should be more systematically used to broadcast information about the indigent policy in local languages and at times when residents are most likely to listen.

Digital platforms, including municipal websites, WhatsApp groups and SMS alerts, could provide a cost-effective means of disseminating accurate and timely information to a wide audience. Mobile outreach strategies, such as roving registration units or community information caravans, could be particularly effective in reaching remote settlements where residents have limited access to municipal offices or mass media.

Furthermore, municipalities must pay particular attention to inclusivity by ensuring that engagement strategies deliberately target groups that are often marginalised in participatory processes, including women, the elderly, people with disabilities and low-income households without formal documentation. This will ensure that policies reflect the lived realities of diverse community members and avoid reinforcing perceptions of bias or favouritism. The conclusion that there was no evidence of 'symbolic consultation' was derived from both the content of respondents' feedback, which reflected meaningful two-way engagement, and the breadth of participants reached across the four wards, indicating that consultations extended beyond tokenistic involvement. By embedding inclusive, multichannel and interactive communication in the implementation process, municipalities can move beyond symbolic consultation, as evidenced by the study's findings showing substantive feedback from community members, participation across all four wards, and reported opportunities for meaningful input rather than one-off or tokenistic engagement toward genuine co-production of policy. This shift is likely to strengthen trust, improve satisfaction with the indigent programme and ultimately enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of service delivery, as supported by Makoti and Odeku (2021);

Maseko, Robbette and Masungini (2023); Zulu and Mubangizi (2014); and Section 152 of the Republic of South Africa (1996).

An equally important recommendation emerging from this study is the need to strengthen and sustain transparency and accountability mechanisms between municipalities and residents as part of ongoing community involvement, in order to reinforce trust and prevent potential governance challenges. Municipality can enhance transparency by making key aspects of policy implementation publicly visible. For example, municipalities could publish updated indigent registers (while safeguarding personal privacy), service delivery schedules and annual audit reports in public forums, such as municipal notice boards, websites and community meetings. Such practices would provide residents with evidence of adherence to policy commitments and reduce the uncertainty that currently fuels mistrust. Also, municipalities should establish or further strengthen robust grievance redress mechanisms that allow residents to raise complaints and seek resolution in a timely and transparent manner, as this study did not specifically investigate the availability or effectiveness of existing grievance redress mechanisms. These mechanisms could include dedicated offices or hotlines for indigent support queries, online complaint portals or mobile help desks deployed in rural areas.

Conclusion

While the indigent policy in NLM was formulated in line with national frameworks and through participatory mechanisms, the actual process of consultation and community involvement was uneven. Although municipal officers reported wide consultation, most residents expressed uncertainty about being involved, indicating that participation was limited or tokenistic. Furthermore, communication strategies were dominated by ward meetings and mass media, which excluded remote and marginalised groups. This limited inclusivity has weakened community trust and reduced perceptions of policy legitimacy. This limited consultation is evident in poor community involvement in municipal affairs, and is likely to undermine policy legitimacy, community ownership and subsequent policy implementation effectiveness. The study has outlined some actionable recommendations that can assist municipalities in formulating and implementing indigent policies that align with the needs of communities and that respond to their intended objectives through community involvement in the process.

Acknowledgements

This article is partially based on Hlengiwe H. Khoza's Doctor of Public Affairs thesis titled 'Implementation of the indigent policy in Nkomazi Municipality: Towards a sustainable service delivery model' submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, Department of Public Management, Tshwane University of Technology in 2025. The thesis is currently unpublished and not publicly available. The thesis was supervised by Professor Ricky Munyaradzi Mukonza and Professor Hubert Mashupye Maserumule. The thesis was

reworked, revised and adapted into a journal article for publication. The authors confirm that the content has not been previously published or disseminated and comply with ethical standards for original publication.

Competing interests

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

CRedit authorship contribution

Hlengiwe H. Khoza: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Software, Visualisation and Writing – original draft. Ricky M. Mukonza: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Project administration, Supervision, Validation and writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and took responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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