Received: 6 April 2022 | Revised: 30 March 2023 | Accepted: 3 April 2023

DOI: 10.1002/pad.2012

RESEARCH ARTICLE

WILEY

Participatory governance and the capacity to engage: A systems lens

Elmé Vivier[1] | Diana Sanchez-Betancourt[2]

[1]Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK

[2]Human Sciences Research Council, Cape Town, South Africa

Correspondence
Elmé Vivier.
Email: elme.vivier@ntu.ac.uk

Funding information
National Treasury Cities Support Grant, Grant/Award Number: RFP 13/2012

Abstract

Effective local participatory governance depends on government responsiveness. Drawing insights from empirical research in a large South African city, we show how inadequate integration of institutional platforms for community participation into the wider participatory system undermines this capacity. While much of the participatory governance literature considers tools, norms and the experiences of citizens, we explore how officials, structures and platforms within the city interact. We apply a systems lens to understand the municipal capacity to engage and respond to citizens and communities. Our analysis demonstrates that officials navigate an institutional system experiencing disconnected municipal structures, engagement practices and platforms. We theorise the government capacity to engage in terms of the personalisation, co-creation and institutionalisation of responsiveness. This capacity to engage thus requires a systemic capability that acknowledges complexity and nurtures collective learning alongside institutional design strategies that seek to address potential disconnects.

KEYWORDS
community engagement, municipal capacity, participatory governance, responsiveness, systems thinking

1 | INTRODUCTION

Public participation has become a widely accepted and defining feature of policy and governance systems across liberal democracies, and particularly in cities and local government. Current research suggests that, despite the proliferation of specific participatory platforms, these often fail to embed within political and administrative systems (Bussu et al., 2022). In South Africa, community participation is constitutionally mandated, with national policy and legislation dictating principles and structures across local government and service delivery processes. Yet despite formal institutionalisation, municipalities and cities struggle to meaningfully engage citizens and communities (Storey, 2014). This is evident in the substantial increase in protest across the country, attributed to community frustrations with poor governance and service delivery (Chigwata et al., 2017). While the ambition of participatory governance is to strengthen government's capacity to engage and improve public service outcomes (Baldwin, 2020), in practice this requires more than legal frameworks and discrete, add-on initiatives (Blanco et al., 2022; Speer, 2012).

Prior research on participation highlights the importance of local government capacity (Eckerd & Heidelberg, 2020; Ngo

et al., 2019) and the agency of local officials (Nguyen et al., 2015; Peake & Forsyth, 2022; Yang & Callahan, 2007). Insofar as engaging citizens also involves bureaucratic responsiveness across the institution (Eckerd & Heidelberg, 2020), developing internal capacities and coordination of such responsiveness becomes important. Although an emerging literature examines various facets of public officials' experiences of participation (see e.g., Migchelbrink & Van de Walle, 2020; Yang, 2005), community perspectives are often prioritised (Tapscott & Thompson, 2013; van Eijk et al., 2019). Yet officials stand at the frontline of policy implementation and are expected to give flesh to the ideals of participatory governance. We therefore take as starting point officials' experiences with participation, and ask: what are the challenges city officials face in implementing participatory governance? How do they address these challenges, and how does this shape the city's capacity to engage and be responsive?

To answer these questions, we take a systems perspective to explore the capacity of city institutions to be responsive (Kvilvang et al., 2020). A systems perspective can elucidate how different institutional elements interact and produce unpredictable (even unintended) outcomes (Williams et al., 2017). While research on participatory governance from a systems perspective is limited, public administration and political science scholars have turned to systems thinking to explore public policy and management (Butler & Allen, 2008; Eppel & Rhodes, 2018; Haynes, 2018), as well as the dynamics between, rather than simply within, discrete participatory platforms (Dean et al., 2020; Holdo, 2020). While much is known about specific participatory platforms (Mansbridge et al., 2012), we look beyond a single approach or institutional innovation, to explore how different platforms and initiatives influence one another, and thus how participatory governance as a system operates (Bussu et al., 2022). A systems perspective is especially relevant to developing country contexts where municipal institutions may still be relatively new, resources limited, and the pressures for democratic processes alongside efficient delivery high.

We contribute to this literature through a qualitative case study comprising interviews and focus groups with 59 officials within a rapidly growing and complex South African city. Officials' views offer insights into a system that involves multiple forms of engagement across departments and processes. Our analysis shows how this system fragments rather than integrates departmental practices, corporate structures, and engagement platforms. We conclude that the capacity to engage hinges on individual agency and relationships as well as the capacity of the institutional system to support and absorb this agency, that is, a systemic capability. This builds on recent debates on bureaucracy in the local sphere and the importance of both public officials and the institutional environment (Lotta et al., 2022). We further theorise the capacity for participatory governance as encompassing the *personalisation*, *co-creation*, and *institutionalisation* of responsiveness.

2 | PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE AND THE CAPACITY TO ENGAGE

A considerable literature delves into various aspects of participation. These include studies on instrumental versus normative drivers (Chigova & Hofisi, 2021; Fung, 2015); barriers and opportunities (Kim, 2011); methods, forms and strategies (Kondlo, 2010; Siebers, 2018); and the logics at play in specific approaches (He, 2011; Molepo et al., 2015). In this paper, we focus on the capacities for local government responsiveness across multiple, varied structures and practices. Our starting point is the importance of bureaucratic responsiveness as a key ingredient for participatory governance. We highlight two essential elements to the government capacity to engage and respond: the agency of local officials and organisational support and coordination. Thereafter, we discuss the systems and complexity literature to unpack organisational coordination as more than a technical administrative capacity but rather involving dynamic linkages, learning and alignment.

2.1 | Bureaucratic responsiveness

Participatory governance is often associated with the concept of government 'responsiveness'. For citizen participation to exert influence, it must be 'heard' by government, and government actors must be capacitated to respond (van Donk & Williams, 2015). This 'responsiveness' includes listening, valuing and acting upon people's concerns in the public policy terrain, whether through communication, deliberation or collaboration (Baldwin, 2020; Tavares et al., 2021). It also encompasses the integration of public inputs into policy decisions and services (Speer, 2012). Theories of participatory governance have long posited that service provision activities benefit when citizens are afforded the opportunity to contribute (Jakobsen et al., 2019; Malemane & Nel-Sanders, 2021).

Without denying the influence of the political sphere in shaping the environment of public participation (McDonald & Smith, 2004), how participation is administered and the bureaucratic capacity for responsiveness also matter (Ngo et al., 2019; Yang & Callahan, 2007). According to Eckerd and Heidelberg (2020), local bureaucracies and officials within them are not simply passive recipients of external political pressures and policies. Acting within the political environment and implementing policy requires judgement and initiative. This is especially the case in participation where officials are expected to deliver on efficiency objectives, while realising inclusiveness and bottom-up decision-making (Neshkova, 2014). It also manifests in continuing debates and lack of agreement in the literature regarding the purpose and criteria of success for participation, understood as either deepening democracy or enhancing governance (Kübler et al., 2020; Van Damme & Brans, 2012). In South Africa, the White Paper on Local Government defines participation and efficiency as the dual objectives of local participatory governance, reflecting both neoliberal ideals of New Public Management and democratic ideals of

people-led-development (Pieterse et al., 2008). It is thus the task of municipalities and local officials to realise this dual mandate, precisely in the interface with communities.

2.2 | Individual agency and organisational factors

To better understand bureaucratic responsiveness within participatory governance, it is important to examine the contribution of officials, as well as the influence of the organisation. Local officials shape participatory spaces, often determining the extent or depth of participation (Eckerd & Heidelberg, 2020). The importance of individual officials is further reflected in studies of street-level bureaucracy (SLB), a term coined by Michael Lipsky in 1969 to refer to the state level where public servants directly interact with citizens. It is here where the core of engagement happens, and where officials' discretion is most prominent (Hupe, 2019).

The extant literature further suggests officials' perceptions of organisational factors shape their attitudes towards to participation; these include perceptions of red tape, resources, procedures, hierarchy and autonomy, to name a few (Migchelbrink & Van de Walle, 2020). While such factors may support and/or constrain participation for individual officials, we are interested in how officials' agency and organisational factors weave together across multiple participatory structures and processes. In other words, what kind of coordination capacity(ies) might be needed for a participatory governance system?

A recent special issue on SLB in various developing country contexts (see Lotta et al., 2022) underscores the importance of institutional design for effective participation. Speer (2012) suggests the institutional capacity to engage includes bureaucratic competence, financial resources, and political willingness. Similarly, Ngo et al. (2019) identify government capacity—and specifically how leadership, information exchange, and financial resources interact—as a precondition for quality community participation and realising good outcomes. Government capacity can therefore be understood as a composite concept, raising questions about the coordination and alignment between constituting capacities.

2.3 | A systems perspective in public policy and management

To better understand bureaucratic responsiveness as a coordination capacity, we employ a systems perspective. A systems perspective elucidates the dynamic interconnections across multiple platforms and processes and the functioning of the whole, offering insights into the capacity to engage and coordinate processes.

Complex systems are emergent, self-organising and unpredictable, suggesting the world—and organisations within it—do not function like machines (Eppel & Rhodes, 2018). In the municipal context, this means officials work in organisations where influence emerges from multiple directions (i.e., not only top-down), making outcomes and consequences unpredictable and beyond individual control (Haynes, 2018). People, procedures, materials, goals, relationships, etc., interact in non-linear, recursive and dynamic ways (Williams et al., 2017). Events and occurrences in one part of the system can influence other, seemingly unrelated events or parts of the system (Wagenaar, 2007).

According to Eppel and Rhodes (2018), a systems perspective helps to identify patterns of behaviour and interaction in public policy processes, with the potential to illuminate unintended effects and to improve governance practices. Butler and Allen's (2008) research on policy implementation also underscores the importance of frontline officials in system self-organising. They argue that, as officials interpret national policy for local contexts, their discretionary decisions contribute to the complexity and unpredictability of policy implementation. This suggests that bureaucratic responsiveness exceeds the administration of predictable technical processes and potentially require some form of responsive coordination.

2.4 | Participatory governance from a systems perspective

An emerging literature employs the systems lens to participatory initiatives. This literature indicates important features of a participatory system entail the agency of local officials, the integration of different kinds of knowledge and learning, as well as the alignment of norms and interactions across different structures.

For example, using complexity to explore how public officials adapt to solve problems in rapidly changing urban environments, Kvilvang et al. (2020) note the reciprocity between processes and outcomes. They observe how in complex settings such as cities, officials decide what issues to pay attention to and what actions to take. While individual learning contributes to system flexibility and adaptation, collective learning—enabled through the flow of information and shared learning experiences—allows for collective interpretation and action, preventing conflict and duplication of efforts (Saltmarshe et al., 2003). Wagenaar (2007) similarly applies complex systems theory to urban governance and finds that local democratic practices increase system diversity and interaction. Engagement brings citizens' experiential knowledge into governance processes. The increased variety of perspectives enlarges the complexity and the need for better collective learning, but it also enhances the scope for creative problem-solving.

Finally, a systems perspective brings attention to how different platforms and processes intersect, which is not well understood (Holdo, 2020). Curato and Böker (2016), posit that deliberative platforms must be evaluated not only on their internal quality but also their contribution to the co-development of the democratic system. This occurs when deliberative norms are prevalent and enable 'mutually productive interactions between different components and functions' (Curato & Böker, 2016, p. 186). Dean et al. (2020, p. 692) similarly argue for the importance of a systems-oriented design that focuses not only on the deliberative dynamics

within a specific space or platform, but supports 'transmission between different democratic spaces'. We build on these studies to explore the dynamics between different participatory platforms, as well as the interactions or 'transmission' between the institutional structures and actors involved.

3 | RESEARCH METHODS

This paper is based on qualitative data from in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 59 officials from a South African city. The research formed part of a broader project on participatory methodologies and systems within local government that commenced in 2014. The final phase, comprising a case study of the city's local participatory governance system, was conducted in 2016.

The city context and local officials' experiences within it provide an important case to study. During apartheid, South Africa lacked a uniform system of local government and had no metropolitan governance structure (Cameron, 2005). Local authorities were also without constitutional status and politically dependent on provincial and national government (McDonald & Smith, 2004). A series of municipal restructurings followed the period of democratisation after 1994, including the introduction of metros. The participation mandate also marked a fundamental shift in the normative foundations of local government, requiring a new institutional capacity to engage citizens and communities. This case is therefore of a relatively young institution endeavouring to transform its relationship with citizens, and in the process develop the systems and capacity to do so. We selected this city due to its willingness to participate, which provided significant access to officials across the hierarchy and operational/corporate departments.

While a case study design intends to capture how things happen in context (Stake, 2005), a systems lens also offers a dynamic rather than static framing of individual experiences, bringing to the fore the relationships, processes and contextual elements that form the substance and broader picture of those experiences. It can draw out an understanding of institutional dynamics from individual narratives, without losing sight of either.

Participants were identified through purposive, snowball and convenience sampling. The 59 participants represent 13 departments, both operational and corporate, as shown in Table 1 below. Participants were also selected from across the organisational hierarchy. Of these, 37 were men and 22 were women.

Interviews were conducted in person, audio recorded and transcribed. The data were analysed using Atlas.ti through an abductive process (Klag & Langley, 2013) using open and reflexive thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The interviews explored officials' views on the purpose of participation, what structures, processes and methods they use to engage communities, and the main challenges they face.

Through open coding, we analysed the data around practices, structures and constraints associated with participation. We then organised the codes according to the formal structures and platforms of the city, developing a descriptive account of how participation is conducted throughout the institution. We then applied thematic coding to explore the relations between codes and to identify patterns. In this process, we identified three areas where the city engages citizens and communities, each accompanied by specific constraints: (1) departmental practices engaging communities in service and project delivery, where individual agency is prominent but constrained by institutional silos; (2) corporate structures intended to support participation within the institution, but blocked

TABLE 1 Participants per department and level.

Department	Directors	Middle managers	Officers	Total per department
Communications & media	1			1
Parks, sport & recreation		3	3	6
Development facilitation unit		1		1
Economic, environmental & spatial planning		4	1	5
Environmental resource management		1		1
Human & informal settlements	1	2	4	7
Integrated development planning		2	1	3
Urban regeneration			2	2
Public participation	1		3	4
Social & early childhood development			7	7
Sub-councils		2	3	5
Transport		1	4	5
Utility services	1	3	8	12
Total number of participants	4	19	36	59

by wider institutional processes; and (3) city-wide platforms intended to engage citizens and communities in distinct ways, but with spill-over effects into one another.

4 | RESEARCH CONTEXT

In post-1994 South Africa, cities and municipalities were charged to build relationships with communities through various forms of participation, and made responsible for delivering key services to realise rights such as housing (Janse van Rensburg & Naudé, 2007). However, given the development pressures and need for localised solutions, the system has been overburdened with institutional ambiguities and exclusionary budgetary and participatory planning (Landau et al., 2013).

The local participatory governance system in South Africa encompasses three main areas of operation. The first is city-wide integrated development planning (IDP). Through this process, a 5-year plan is produced, intended to inform 3-year budget allocations to key programmes and projects. In theory, local communities get involved in analysing issues and identifying projects for Council approval. How engagements are organised depends on each municipality and may include ward committee inputs (discussed below), stakeholder and business forums, and *imbizos* (public meetings) and communication outlets. In reality, however, IDP participation is often routine and formulaic, offering at best an information channel (Malabela & Ally, 2011) and remaining isolated from actual decision-making (Berrisford & Kihato, 2008). IDPs have also been described as an effort to integrate inclusiveness with technocratic managerialism, but leaving it to officials to work out how to navigate these tensions in practice (Harrison, 2006). Actual participation in the IDP is also overwhelmingly scant, with recent research into the IDP in Gauteng finding that most people (77% of those surveyed) do not know about the IDP, and less than 5% actually participate (Mushongera & Khanyile, 2019). Such alarming statistics indicate wider systemic issues undermine the effectiveness of such platforms.

The second area of municipal operation is through ward councillors and ward committees. These are area-based representative structures mandated to inform communities of local matters and to bring community issues and concerns to Council. Though intended as regular consultative platforms, in our research these were described as ad hoc and dependent on local councillors' efforts and community dynamics. A range of issues have arisen since their inception. Notably, ward councillors and committees have restricted or proscribed choices, limited discretionary funding available, and can recommend but not actually influence council decisions on behalf of communities (Buire, 2011; Lemanski, 2017). They have also been found to be vulnerable to party dominance, clientelism and patronage (Barichievy et al., 2005; Piper & Deacon, 2008).

The third area involves participation in the delivery of public services and projects. This can occur through submissions into proposed by-laws, commenting on proposed developments, completing satisfaction surveys, or engaging in specific development projects, either in design or through some form of co-production. Line departments usually manage participation in specific projects and services, often in informal settlements such as in the provision of housing or settlement upgrading, or the development of public and social infrastructure. Community representatives participate via beneficiary committees or project steering committees (PSCs). However, participation here is also often limited, constrained by municipal legal and supply chain requirements, or curbed through predetermined plans and delimited roles for community representatives (Massey, 2015; Smith, 2011).

The structures setup for participation are clearly beleaguered with considerable challenges. While our research is focused on city or metropolitan government, we acknowledge that smaller municipalities, and arguably the municipal system as a whole, suffer severe dysfunction, party politicisation and corruption. Municipalities are also burdened by the conflicting ideals of overly ambitious legislation. Nevertheless, our data suggest that, for relatively well-resourced and functioning cities, giving flesh to the ideals of participation also runs into difficult coordination challenges, especially felt by local officials who must navigate the institutional and policy environment as they engage communities.

5 | FINDINGS

In analysing the data, we were intrigued by how much officials and departments worked in silos, sometimes even when working in the same community or geographic area. Though silo-working is not surprising, we wondered what this might mean for community engagement. We observed how, no matter the type or level of participation (whether in projects or as part of city-wide integrated planning, for instance), each platform seemed bogged down by issues for which other structures had been designed. We then turned to the systems and complexity literature as a lens to further explain these dynamics. Through this lens, we interpret these issues as evidence of system disconnects and their unintended consequences, with implications for what might be missing ingredients in the City's capacity to engage communities and embed participatory governance in the system. Our findings are organised around the three main disconnects derived from the data: disconnected operational practices, disconnected corporate structures and disconnected engagement platforms.

5.1 | Disconnected operational practices

At both department and project level, no specific engagement approach is uniformly followed, although there are discernible patterns. With few exceptions, departments and officials work independently, both in designing participation methods and in their actual engagements with communities. In fact, at the time of the research, departments worked with different area divisions:

> Everyone uses different regions. And even within water and sanitation. Finance has two different area maps. Utilities have one and informal settlements has three. […] I don't even know how many iterations of these kinds of boundaries [there are]. So if he's working here, he speaks to one person from Human Settlements, but that person doesn't work here so he's got to speak to another person.
>
> (Focus group 11)

In their participation efforts, departments may run separate community meetings, establish their own PSCs, and rely on the initiative of each project manager. As one director shared, 'It's basically dealt with on a case-by-case basis, and we rely on the people on the ground who are looking at it' (Focus group 11).

The design of the engagement process also depends on the nature of the project (including what service, time frame, regulations, etc.), the project manager's knowledge of the community, and their relationships with the councillor, community organisations and other stakeholders. Some departments have developed flow charts and terms of reference, and engage communities extensively, sometimes over several years (especially for area planning and urban regeneration). Others proceed in more ad hoc ways, holding a few public meetings. Some implement projects without any engagement whatsoever, only 'putting out fires' whenever there is a fall-out or community resistance to a project (Focus group 14). The following reflection summarises this disconnect between departments and ways of working:

> Cooperation with other departments is still a problem because we go into a community, I'll go with my [specific service] head, he goes with his [specific service] head, she goes with her other head… But what we don't see is that we're talking to the same people. What we don't have is a strategy of going there to represent the city.
>
> (Focus group 10)

How each department engages a community has repercussions for other departments too. Failing to engage communities before designing plans or bringing in contractors may lead to community frustration, affecting other departments working in that area. One official described how residents unexpectedly burnt their utility vehicles: 'you really don't understand, […] you think you're providing a service, and sometimes you're not even involved in the issue' (Focus group 14).

The scale and resource constraints that departments face, especially hundreds of projects across numerous communities and very tight project cycles, make planning and budgeting for participation difficult. Again, it comes down to individual officials 'making a plan' or 'feeling [their] way through things' (Interview 18). When initiating engagements, such as for housing development projects, decisions must be made about the overall approach (whether to run a public meeting and/or set up a PSC), to practical things like borrowing a projector or loudspeaker, putting up posters, or paying for refreshments 'out of your own pocket'. It is also up to individual project managers to balance inputs from communities with that of technical experts and external contractors, and in relation to geographic, legal and financial constraints. Informal relationships within the institution and knowing who to speak to therefore becomes important.

Significant to city responsiveness is that officials build relationships with community representatives during their engagements, often becoming the 'face' of the City. However, it is not always possible for a project leader to sustain their involvement in one community or project, especially over an extended period. Officials may be moved off projects depending on their expertise and the project cycle, or they may be moved to another geographic area. And yet, they may still be held accountable by the community. In one case, an official had moved off a project as it entered a new phase. When the new project leader didn't respond to a specific issue raised by the community PSC, the community leaders called the original project leader and berated him 'for leaving them'. Responsiveness at that point seems to hinge on the official's relationships and clout within the organisation, and willingness to find a solution.

5.2 | Disconnected corporate structures

Alongside disconnected practices, another major disconnect is evident between operational and corporate departments, specifically the Public Participation Unit (PPU). The PPU is intended to manage participation across the administration by providing procedural guidelines for line departments, managing a schedule of participation, assisting with advertising, organising logistics, and sharing information. However, few officials engaged the unit, or knew that they were required to report their engagement activities to the unit each year. Some were not even aware of its existence. Those who had worked with it described it as overly procedural and compliance-driven, concerned with meeting reporting requirements and out of touch with the challenges of actual engagement:

> They have developed extensive standard operating procedures […] So, from the official side there is procedures as to when you engage and when you do this and that. So there's procedures, but you can't roll that out and tell the community, this is my standard operating procedures, you've got three days to respond. It doesn't work like that. There it becomes very fuzzy.
>
> (Interview 7)

Officials in the PPU, however, believed line departments put the unit under severe pressure by failing to plan properly. They also expressed frustration with the City's compliance mentality:

> I think the problem is the compliance way does not really invite people […] PPU is a very bird-eyed view. We sit here in the ivory tower, we send out communications and we assume the public is going to get it. So yes, it is compliant, we've ticked our boxes.
>
> (Interview 13)

This disconnect between departments and the PPU means considerable energy is channelled on either end, but without being effectively aligned. Although officials in the PPU synthesise, at least on paper, all the activities reported to them, that this unit is hidden and side-lined means they are unable to gain from or build upon the more substantive aspects of engagement emerging at the departmental and project level. Unsurprisingly, a lack of learning within the organisation was another challenge noted in the data:

> It would be fantastic if the project managers could meet every quarter and say, 'I battle with this'. But we don't and there is no formal record of it either, which is a pity, because we don't learn from our own lessons.
>
> (Focus group 2)

In other words, the energy, experiences and knowledge of officials are not fed back into teams or the wider institution in a coherent and constructive way, therefore blocking opportunities for learning. Some interviewees traced this challenge to an unstable organisation undergoing too many periods of restructuring:

> There are constantly things being changed so you can't get a rhythm. Today you need to speak to this person and you start building a relationship and understanding their processes and adapting to that, and tomorrow you get an instruction, 'No, they're cut out, you now need to work with this one'. […] Every time, those people who have moved need to establish new ways of working and linking in with one another […] And that's why people are working in silos, because they can only depend on themselves.
>
> (Focus group 10)

It is not only the disruption due to restructuring that creates this dynamic. The underpinning performance management system also generates such divisions:

> We have different things on our scorecard. At the end of the day, they want to show that they have achieved their scorecard. And it creates in essence a tension.
>
> (Focus group 8)

The disconnects between operational and corporate departments are therefore not merely challenges of practice. They also result from institutional systems that undermine meaningful knowledge-sharing and learning across all departments.

5.3 | Disconnected engagement platforms

The city offers various engagement platforms and communication channels, including a municipal website, social media sites, and a central call centre. While communication channels are not technically platforms of engagement, for citizens to be able to report service issues and receive information is important. These different platforms are intended to complement one another, co-producing a system of participatory governance. However, our data suggest unintended feedback occurs between these, with weaknesses in one platform affecting the functioning and experiences of others.

In relation to city-wide planning, for instance, interviewees described the IDP as 'the blueprint of what we do' (Interview 1), even 'a holy grail' (Interview 7). But they also questioned whether IDP and budget engagements are useful, adequately linked to other processes, or responsive to citizen inputs:

> The trouble is […] in their homes they've been having issues […] They try to phone the call centre, they try to get hold of their ward councillor. No one's answering the phone. […] So they come to these meetings and [the city] says, 'Oh, the budget for next year is R27 billion', and they go, 'Well, I just want to ask you a question. I live in such and such a road and I've got a problem with my neighbour'. And they go, 'No, we're not here to talk about that'. And then it goes mad because people are frustrated and they want their voices to be heard. […] And [the city] says, 'Oh no, you know, write your name on a comment, put it in this envelope, and we'll get back to you'.
>
> (Interview 16)

This situation suggests a disjuncture between city agendas and citizen expectations, and a possible lack of understanding or alignment around the purpose(s) of specific platforms. This confusion of purpose also illustrates how failures in one part of the system (in the above example, with the call centre) can affect engagements elsewhere (in the IDP and budget process). Even the call centre seems incapable of dealing effectively with issues reported, with one official lamenting that 'technical knowledge is not there, because they don't understand what electricity [for instance] is all about' (Focus group 11). As for the IDP, the unit managing this process also seems unable to respond to or follow-up on citizen inputs:

> We're very limited because even though we coordinate, we are not the lead directorate. So now we receive a comment that's transport orientated, so we forward it to that department. Then it's really out of our hands. […] It becomes very difficult to see if something has actually happened. So it puts us in a difficult position to answer that question. […] We can't decide we're going to answer something on behalf of transport.
>
> (Focus group 4)

These quotes illustrate how city responsiveness via one platform affect engagements via others. Platform disconnects also characterise how officials work amidst different institutional logics and conflicting purposes. The data suggests a general lack of clarity and coherence in how the city understands the purpose of participation, as well as what success means. For instance, many officials associated engagement with democratic values embedded in people's 'right to speak to the City and to raise their issues to the City' (Interview 7). Some referred to bottom-up approaches that get beyond sending out messages, where participation is a process of 'build[ing] a solid ground and solid communities through vibrant speaking out', where communities become involved 'in developing their own areas' (Focus group 6). At the same time, a compliance-driven approach is felt across the system and filters into officials' behaviour:

> The city's got to go through five processes – it's got to go to council, the community needs to be informed and when the closing date happens, we put up the block of flats. And the community's been informed, because we had an open day on the beach in winter when it was raining. […] No one came, [but] it's okay because we had the open day.
>
> (Interview 16)

> We're running at 20 kilometres per hour. Don't worry about delivery, forget delivery. We want to win clean audits, so we must comply, comply, comply.
>
> (Focus group 10)

Still, by far the most common purpose ascribed to participation is to support project and service delivery. Engagement is deemed essential for delivering projects and providing services as smoothly as possible, with successful delivery equating participation success. As one official explained, 'success is if the project runs smooth and budget is spent' (Interview 7). It is through community participation that officials can gather inputs into project decisions, but also secure community buy-in and ownership. Without such support, they risk project delays and disruptions: 'We've seen parks, wonderful parks developed for the community and trashed because the community don't feel that they're part of it' (Interview 4).

Different institutional logics thus weave through the participatory governance system, with different purposes driving behaviours. This is also evident in how the City measures the effectiveness of its engagements with communities, and the lack of clarity around what constitutes success. Asked how participation is evaluated, one interviewee described formal reports and spreadsheets that capture the number of people attending a meeting, the number of comments received, and the number of comments addressed or still outstanding (Focus group 4). At the same time, officials acknowledge the inadequacy of such measures and the lack of clarity:

> If I say public participation was successful, it means that this has happened, that has happened. […] Otherwise, we're really just measuring logistics and logistics doesn't measure the impact of it. […] But because we don't know what 'successful' means, does it mean that someone is actually giving us a response? Or is it that the community feels satisfied that they were consulted? That we don't know.
>
> (Focus group 4)

Such gaps in assessing success may be due to multiple logics informing engagement objectives and community expectations, as well as overly ambitious and even conflicting goals of participatory governance legislation, all of which manifest across multiple disconnect platforms.

6 | DISCUSSION

The experiences of South African city officials offer a concrete view into how participation practices, structures and platforms influence one another. Through a systems lens, we observe how the City's capacity to engage and respond is enacted but also constrained through system dynamics involving inadequate legislative guidance, institutional design and unintended consequences. We theorise the local government capacity to engage in terms of the personalisation, co-creation and institutionalisation of responsiveness. This provides insight into the systemic capabilities needed to strengthen internal coordination and government responsiveness in participatory governance.

6.1 | The personalisation of responsiveness

Our research confirms the extant literature on the discretionary role of officials as a crucial aspect influencing engagement (Nguyen et al., 2015; Tapscott & Thompson, 2013; Yang & Callahan, 2007). Our study surfaces officials' role in *self-organising and innovating practices* with the potential to build or undermine relations of trust between the City and communities. This supports research suggesting the relational resources and creative practices of street-level bureaucrats can strengthen state responsiveness (Peake & Forsyth, 2022).

We theorise officials' role in self-organising participation as the *personalisation of responsiveness*. In a context of disconnects, government responsiveness and the capacity to engage become personalised, relying on the agency of officials to navigate the consequences of fragmented structures. While this enables innovation and relationship-building with communities, it also allows for limited or lack of engagement, with knock-on effects to other departments and projects. The personalisation of responsiveness is thus paradoxically a strength but also risk to government responsiveness if it is not adequately supported by other organisational capacities (e.g., learning and coordinating between departments).

6.2 | The co-creation of responsiveness

While the City struggles to integrate officials' actions and absorb their knowledge and agency, *knowledge-sharing and collective learning* is a crucial local government capacity, as well as a mechanism for coordination. Although the value of collective learning within organisations (Doh & Quigley, 2014; Vince & Broussine, 2000) and within participation processes (Daniels & Walker, 1996) is not new, our case suggests this is especially important to better embed and implement participatory governance.

Our findings show how resources (i.e., capacities, relationships, knowledge) remain with individual officials, projects and departments, seldom feeding back into the larger system. Aspects of institutional design (e.g., unaligned aims, performance goals and geographic working areas) further obstruct effective coordination and collaboration. If responsive and capable officials move to another project, department or area, or leave the institution altogether, the opportunity for others in the system to learn from their relational networks and experiences, is wasted. However, our findings also call into question the capacity of a central structure, like the PPU, to absorb and coordinate knowledge across departments and initiatives. A more systemic approach, where information and knowledge circulate from multiple sources and directions throughout an interconnected system, seems more appropriate. We theorise such an approach as a key organisational capacity for the *co-creation of responsiveness*, absorbing and leveraging knowledge and resources within the system, and strengthening engagement capacities across departments.

6.3 | The institutionalisation of responsiveness

For officials working directly with communities, system disconnects can mean having to face a frustrated citizenry and demands that are far beyond the scope of their work and capacity. To the vast literature documenting the challenges with participation (Lemanski, 2017; Tapscott & Thompson, 2013), our findings underscore the ripple effect of breakdowns across different platforms. Dean et al. (2020) have similarly found that while different deliberative spaces might be designed to contribute different functions (i.e., to gather and channel inputs and create accountability), in practice, participants struggle to compartmentalise (or adhere to) different platform logics. Our findings confirm a similar dynamic as citizens attempt to use any available platform to address their needs and frustrations, regardless of the formally intended purpose and norms. On this basis, *aligning purposes and coordinating responsibilities* within and across platforms becomes an important coordination task, necessary for the *institutionalisation of responsiveness*.

This capacity is not merely administrative but involves value judgements and navigating what might well be contradictory political and governance paradigms underpinning different participation objectives. Navigating such tensions go beyond 'mere' coordination challenges. It thus brings an expanded systemic perspective that, although beyond the scope of our analysis, highlights how the broader social, political and policy contexts also influence how participatory governance unfolds in local government and in specific cities (Curato & Böker, 2016). It indicates the limits of what can be accomplished through the personalisation of responsiveness, even if supported internally by better collective learning. At the same time, while policy contradictions devolve complex political questions to the local sphere and can exacerbate local engagement challenges, this does not preclude the importance of improving internal coordination. As our case shows, a disconnected system also undermines relationship-building and collective learning. While overall policy reform might well be required in the South African context, what we observe in the city in our study is how current weaknesses in the overall design of the participatory governance system puts added pressure on the personalisation of responsiveness, and the need for clearer internal alignment.

6.4 | A systemic framework of participatory governance responsiveness

In Figure 1 below, we synthesise these insights into a systemic framework of participatory governance responsiveness. The framework identifies three forms of responsiveness and the processual capacities needed to move from disconnected practices, structures and platforms towards a system of interconnection and flexibility.

Understanding the organisation as a dynamic system accentuates the limits of institutional design and the need for systems-oriented understanding and practice, that is, a systemic capability. Part of this capability is what Senge (2006) refers to as 'systems intelligence', to be able to see the system and its patterns of interdependence. Painter-Morland (2008) describes a systemic capability as the ability of the organisation to accommodate uncertainty and unpredictability, and to continually adapt through creativity and innovation. It is about organisational members creatively generating new practices, as well as the organisation harnessing this creativity for organisation-wide learning and decision-making (Collier & Esteban, 2000). In line with Wagenaar (2007, p. 43), we conclude that an effective participatory governance system needs 'to be loose enough to let the information freely flow along the nodes and effect the agents, yet structured enough to let the changes and adaptations coalesce into emerging cooperation and system adaptation'. As illustrated in Figure 1, such a systemic capability within the participatory governance context requires aligning purpose and coordinating responsibility, enabling knowledge-sharing and collective learning, and supporting officials to self-organise, innovate and build relationships with communities.

Notably, at the time of this research, the City in our study was going through a restructuring process, which allegedly would introduce an area-based design to better align geographical boundaries and project teams from different departments. Insights from two participants in our research suggest the City gave some consideration to establishing a community engagement role for specific areas to better coordinate across departments. Potentially still missing,

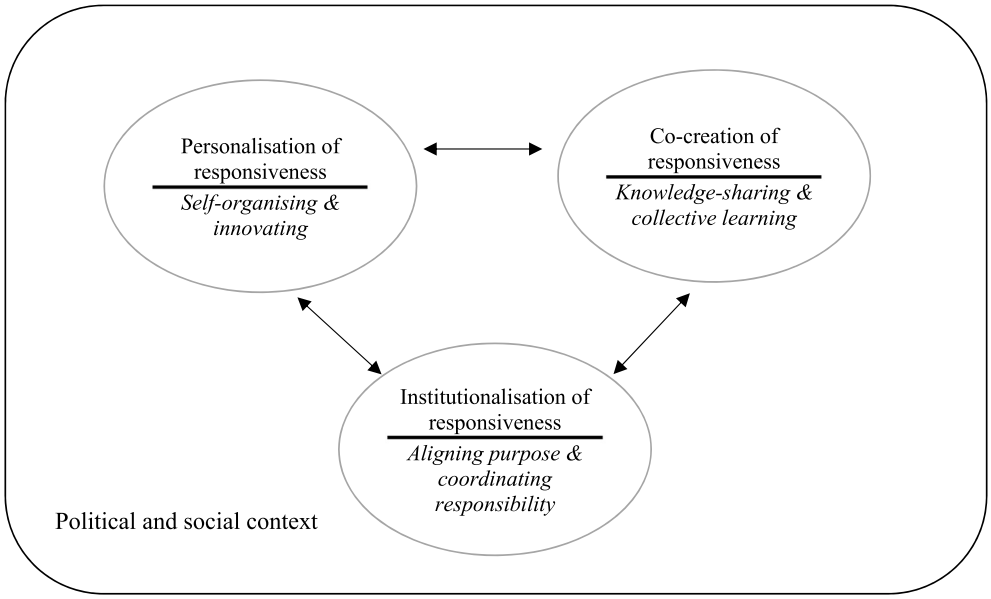

FIGURE 1 A systemic framework of participatory governance responsiveness.

however, was consideration of the linkages between different types of engagement platforms. Whether this has been implemented and effective in improving participation is yet to be seen and is an important area for further research. But such an approach could address some of the unintended consequences experienced from poor alignment within service delivery processes. It should also be supported by a performance management system that encourages and incentivises inter-departmental coordination, collaboration and knowledge-sharing. However, as Curato and Böker (2016) and Peake and Forsyth (2022) point out, there are limits to what can be intentionally planned and promoted. Systems will continue to self-organise according to feedback and the norms driving interactions.

Systems thinking, as a capability potentially shared among public officials and embedded in the institution, could help the City make sense of current (and future) disconnects and generate systemic solutions. The importance of a systemic capability, we believe, contributes to prior assessments of bureaucratic responsiveness and what is needed to strengthen and embed participatory governance.

7 | CONCLUSION

This paper has explored officials' experiences with participation as an entry point to understand the local participatory governance system and the capacity to engage. Through a systems lens, we suggest that different forms of responsiveness and capacities are needed to move from disconnected practices, structures and platforms towards a system of interconnection and flexibility. This requires aligning purpose and responsibility, enabling knowledge-sharing and collective learning, and supporting relationship-building and innovations with communities. This has implications for public administration in terms of both institutional design and in practice.

7.1 | Implications for future research

Firstly, as the studied city has allegedly restructured, follow-up research to track any changes in engagement practices could provide insight in whether and how institutional design shapes government responsiveness. Comparative research on other cities would be similarly useful to explore different ways in which a systemic capability may operate and support local agency. Secondly, one of the limitations of this study was the lack of views from local councillors and political leaders. Future research could explore how the political and administrative interface contributes to the municipal capacity to engage and respond. To what extent does political will, for instance, enable or constrain officials' agency, opportunities for shared learning, or alignment of purposes? Finally, future research could take the complex systems perspective further by investigating the prevalence of systems thinking among practitioners and at different levels of management within a city administration.

PRACTICE IMPACT STATEMENTS

This paper employs a systems lens to local participatory governance. We argue that a systemic capability is required to coordinate across participatory practices, structures and platforms. Without individual innovation, collective learning, or alignment of purpose, a participatory governance system may suffer internal disconnects that undermine the system as a whole.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data used in this research can be made available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions.

ORCID

Elmé Vivier https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3401-0365

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How to cite this article: Vivier, E., & Sanchez-Betancourt, D. (2023). Participatory governance and the capacity to engage: A systems lens. *Public Administration and Development*, *43*(3), 220–231. https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.2012