

The Role of Traditional Leaders in the Midst of The Covid-19 Pandemic: Was It Sufficient?

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Abstract

The central aim of this paper is to interrogate the role played by traditional leaders in fostering service delivery and tackling the spread of COVID-19 pandemic in rural areas. The institution of traditional leadership play a pivotal role in supporting municipalities in rendering services to communities. It can therefore be asserted that all organs of State are duty and morally bound to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic by putting measures in place targeted at mitigating the spread of the virus. In rural areas, municipalities are working closely with the institution of traditional leadership in tackling the spread of the virus. Traditional leaders play imperative roles in local government by improving governance via public participation, development planning, increasing service delivery, an advisory role in the municipal council, and enhancing the livelihoods of local communities in a sustainable manner. During COVID-19 Pandemic, traditional leaders have thus far been proactive in rural areas in the fight against the virus. Methodologically, this paper adopted a Critical Discourse Analysis and secondary data covering the role of traditional leadership in rural areas. The paper concludes by recognising the existence of the institution of traditional leadership as part of public administration. Consequently, the status and identification of the institution of traditional leadership are also recognised by different pieces of legislation, though their role is not clearly defined. Thus, this paper recommends that the role of traditional leaders in local government needs to be redefined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 and other pieces of legislation as they are no clear.

Keywords: Traditional leadership, COVID-19 pandemic, Role and Local government

Introduction and Background

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic at Wuhan in China presented many challenges across all spheres of government. UNESCO (2020) posits that COVID-19 pandemic has affected all countries around the world. It hit Asia, Europe and the Americans before gradually taking root in Africa and no area has been spared, whether socially, culturally or economically. In that regards, all organs of state including local government and traditional leaders have been required to be proactive and responsive to the COVID-19 pandemic by putting in place measures targeting at containing the spread of the virus. Poswa (2020) opined that the role of traditional leaders in the fight against the spread of COVID-19 has thus far been pro-active in rural areas. The suspension of mass gatherings, funerals and the initiation schools contributed significantly to saving lives, including, of those young men who had

undergone initiation and prone to all sorts of risks. Nevertheless, not everyone supported or appreciated the importance of these efforts by the traditional leaders as they insisted that the process of initiation must be completed despite the great risk it poses in transmitting the virus to initiates. Poswa (2020) further argues that before 1994, traditional leaders effectively functioned as the only local governance structure in rural areas, vested with significant powers and responsibilities. For instance, traditional leaders were tasked with a variety of functions such as land allocation and dispute resolution in rural areas. In essence, the institution of traditional leadership was the form of local government with the highest authority in a community. Thus, Selepe (2009) and Poswa (2020) are of the view that traditional leaders did not welcome the 'wall-to-wall system' of local government in rural areas which was introduced and debated in the early 1990s. This was to be predictable as it would mean loss of power for traditional leadership. It is thus unsurprising that many traditional leaders resisted the establishment of municipalities in rural areas. When the system of local government was rooted in the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and given the mandate, in 2000, to deliver basic municipal services and foster development throughout South Africa, tensions and contestations between municipalities and traditional leaders began to emerge sharply (Poswa, 2020). These tensions and contestations have once again surfaced during the National Lockdown that was declared by the President of the Republic of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa to contain the spread of coronavirus. Traditional leaders took significant decisions and are playing various roles which have impacted on the government's response to COVID-19.

The institution of traditional leadership remains one of the most contested topics in post-apartheid South Africa. This is despite section 212 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 and other pieces of legislations treaty this institution with status in this democratic dispensation. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 and other pieces of legislation such as National House of Traditional Leaders Act, 2009 (Act 2 of 2009), White Paper on Traditional Leadership and Governance of 2003 and the Traditional Leadership and Governance Act, (Act 41 of 2003) does not define the role of traditional leaders in local government explicitly but rather their role largely overlaps with those exercised by elected councillors (Shabangu and Khalo, 2008:324; Phago and Netserwa, 2011:1023; George and Binza 2011). This pieces of legislations have been enacted with an aim of positioning and strengthening the statutory role of traditional leadership to promote and contribute to the development and service delivery of communities within their area of jurisdiction. Thus, pieces legislations will be discussed again extensively in a relevant separate section to assist the reader to comprehend the significance and role of traditional leadership in the local sphere of government. This conference paper examines the role that traditional leadership play local government during and post COVID-19 pandemic.

Setting the Scene

According to Selepe (2009), traditional authorities used to perform several local government functions in rural areas before the enactment of the Constitution of the

Republic of South Africa, 1996. It can however be argued that the provisions of the 1996 Constitution brought limitations to the functions performed by traditional leaders. Today, the institution of traditional leadership is generally responsible for carrying out limited customary functions. In the current formalised governmental structures, traditional leaders ought to be acknowledged as supporting structures in the delivery of services to communities in rural areas. The 1996 Constitution makes provision in terms of Chapter 7, which sets out the functions of “wall-to-wall” municipalities, the powers and functions of traditional authorities. The paper however argues that such provisions are not explicitly clear on how traditional leaders’ duties overlap with the formal government processes especially in relation to how they relate to societies they ‘govern’. Furthermore, some of their customary functions are somehow limited due to their very nature of contradicting the Constitution (1996) and other legislative prescripts. Traditional leaders are therefore only afforded ex officio council observer status by the Constitution. This conundrum is further worsened by the provisions of the Local Government: Municipal Structures Act (117 of 1998) which downgrades their influence to a non-voting role.

Selepe (2009) argues that the reduction of the status of traditional leaders unleashed a political battle, which came ahead in the run-up to the 2000 elections and has remained largely unresolved to date. Traditional leaders strive for recognition in local government in rural areas. Mabutla (2001) points out that there is a growing tension between local government and traditional authorities that needs the government’s immediate attention. The role of traditional leaders in South Africa has remained a controversial issue while it has the potential to remain as it is. Against this background, this paper seeks to critically examine the role played by the traditional leaders in fostering service delivery in rural areas during the COVID-19 pandemic and perhaps post-Covid.

Research Design and Method

No research study can take place without the research design and a method. This paper adopted a qualitative research design which through literature review is used to interrogate academic writings in subjects under study. Qualitative methods provide results that are generally rich and detailed, offering ideas and concepts to inform your research.

Bryman (2020) indicates that a qualitative research is a collection of social data that focuses on meaning thus providing valuable insights into the local perspectives of study populations. This is exactly what this paper seeks to achieve in assessing the role of traditional leaders in ensuring service delivery in rural areas amid the covid-19 pandemic. This design and method can contribute to culturally specific and contextually rich data (Mack, *et al.*, 2005). Neuman, 2014 is also of the view that, in a qualitative study, the researcher relies on the principles from interpretive or critical social science emphasis on the language of cases and contexts and of cultural meaning (Neuman, 2014).

Data Analysis

The existing literature was systematically reviewed and synthesised. This process involved the review of peer-reviewed journal papers, books, government legislations,

and internet sources. Therefore, the paper drew information from published articles, reports, newspapers, books and other readily available material. This was to bring to the fore the relationship between traditional leaders and service delivery using literature as an instrument with which to collect, synthesize and analyse for the purpose of coming to a desired conclusion.

Conceptualising Relevant Concepts of the Study

This section of the paper provides an overview of literature in relation to traditional leadership and the COVID-19 pandemic in the South African rural areas.

According to George and Binza (2011:979), traditional leadership is defined as the oldest form of societal organisation that delivered on developmental needs of communities and preserved the culture, traditions, customs and values of African communities. This however is not to say that the institution of traditional leadership is wholly an African phenomenon. Selepe (2009:19) defines traditional leadership as an institution governing a particular tribe according to customary law and has developed over many hundreds of years in Africa. It has served the people of Africa through wars, periods of slavery, famine, freedom struggles, economic and political restructuring and during colonial and apartheid periods. According to Williams (2012:2), the ruling African National Congress (ANC) has in the past committed itself to the improvement of the lives of the people and saw that task as being easily addressed by supporting traditional leaders and recognising them in the new Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. This was important because traditional leaders claimed to have authority over their people. However, there continues to be criticisms on the unauthoritative powers afforded to traditional leaders as per the provisions of the Constitution (1996). Musitha (2013:54) is of the view that traditional leaders ought to also preside over customary law courts and maintain law and order, consulting with traditional communities through *lekgotla* and assisting members of the community in their dealings with the State. Such a function however ought to be exercised within the provisions of the Constitution and other laws of the Republic. Musitha (2013:54) further argues that traditional leaders should advise the government on traditional affairs through the Houses and Council of Traditional Leaders, convening meetings to consult with communities on needs and priorities and providing information. They also have a responsibility of protecting the cultural values and providing a sense of community in their areas, through a communal social frame of reference, being the spokespersons generally of their communities, being symbols of unity in their community. It is imperative to understand the local government sphere as the focus of this paper. Local government is the sphere of government that is closest to the people and must serve the needs of communities at grassroots levels (Van der Waldt *et al.*, 2014). The term local government will be used interchangeably or synonymously with a municipality in this paper. The spread of COVID-19 has affected all spheres of government, therefore, it is important to examine the role played by the traditional leaders in the local sphere of government to mitigate the spread of the pandemic.

Ongoing Role of Traditional Leadership in Fostering Service Delivery in Rural Areas

Daily, traditional leaders play a significant role in ensuring service delivery within

their areas of jurisdiction in collaboration with a relevant municipality. Thus, the role of traditional leadership in local government includes but not limited to;

The improvement of governance via public participation in development planning and projects.

Reddy and Shembe (2016) state that traditional leaders are considered as one of the key role-players or stakeholders, particularly in the governance of local government in South Africa. The Local Government: Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act (Act 41 of 2003), provides for the traditional leadership to be engaged in the promotion of socio-economic development, good governance and service delivery, especially in rural areas. The local government uses the Integrated Development Planning (IDP) as development planning instrument aimed at addressing socio-economic challenges (Mathebula, Nkuna & Sebola, 2016; Mathebula, 2018). Integrated Development Planning is a process through which municipalities prepare a strategic development plan for a prescribed period of five (5) year (Pauw *et al.*, 2004; Valeta & Walton, 2008; Mathebula, 2015; Sebola, 2017). The institution of traditional leadership in collaboration with the municipality and other stakeholders, they use IDP to fasten and improve service delivery in an endeavour to improve the quality of life of local citizens. Traditional leadership play a pivotal role in the promotion of social and economic development of their communities through their participation in IDP. According to Brynard *et al* (2011:116), the participation of traditional authorities in the IDP is confined to both their participation in the formulation of IDP and its implementation processes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most rural areas across South Africa were denied access to basic and prerequisite services such as water. The fight against the Corona virus crucially necessitate that municipalities provide clean water. Traditional leaders, who serve as a bridge between communities they govern and municipalities they serve, ought to ensure the safety of their respective communities by ensuring efficient and effective delivery.

Enhancing service delivery

The South African democratic government has three spheres of government, namely, national, provincial and local. As a result, the local sphere of government is vested with the sole responsibility of providing basic services to communities within their jurisdictions in an endeavour to eradicate the injustices and inequalities inherited by the apartheid government (Mathebula, 2015). Local sphere of government works closely with traditional leaders to increase the quality of service delivery (Molepo, Maleka and Khalo, 2015). Nekhavhambe (2014) argues that to ensure effective service delivery at the local sphere of government, it becomes a prerequisite for municipalities to work closer with traditional leaders since they are closer to communities under their jurisdiction. For example, During COVID-19 pandemic, in some municipalities, traditional leaders played a pivotal role in ensuring that water tankers were provided by the municipality or appointed service providers. This paper argues that it is important to note that the quest for better municipal service delivery cannot be achieved in isolation. Therefore, there should be an integration of traditional leaders into the local government. In simple terms, traditional leaders play a Pivotal role to

ensure that municipalities provide services to local citizens in a sustainable manner id South Africa is to win the battle against the Corona virus.

An advisory role in the municipal council

Madumo (2015) posits that the other role of the institution of traditional leadership in local government is to play an advisory role in municipal council. In terms section 81 of Local: Municipal Structures Act of 1998, the institution of the traditional leadership has to address the municipal council on matters that affect their area within the municipal jurisdiction. Even though their representation in the municipal council does not afford them the right to vote in the council meetings, they advise the council on customary laws, land administration and community needs since they are closer to the people. They participate actively in municipal developmental affairs, which will have impacts on communities under their leadership. Furthermore, Lutabingwa, Sabela and Mbata (2006) argue that the development of rural communities cannot succeed without the full support and participation of traditional leadership in the municipal council. Traditional leaders should be consulted by the municipal council before any decision can be made. In that regards, they act as an advisory body within the municipal council on issues that affects their communities. Local government and other spheres of government ought to therefore collaborate with traditional leaders in avenues meant to fight the spread of COVID-19 especially in rural areas.

Musitha (2013:54) is also of the opinion that traditional leaders should advise the government on traditional affairs through the Houses and Council of Traditional Leaders, hold meetings to consult with communities on needs and priorities and providing information. They also should uphold cultural values and build a sense of community through a communal social frame of reference, to be spokespersons for their communities as symbols of solidarity in their communities. For instance, it can be argued in this paper, that in some municipalities, traditional leaders served as an advisor during the mitigation of the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. They served as an advisor during the distribution of food parcel to assist in identifying the neediest and vulnerable families. They further advised on the placement of water tanks with areas which were meant for the prevention of the spread the COVID-19 pandemic.

Enhance the livelihoods of local communities in a sustainable manner

To date, it is evident that traditional leadership plays a pivotal role in aspects relating to community development. They can be used to good advantage in terms of interacting with municipalities and collaborating with them in terms of physical, social and economic development of the local communities (Picard and Mogale, 2015:233). Moreover, Lutabingwa *et al.*, (2006) argue that the enactment of Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act (Act 41 of 2003) opened a new window of opportunity for traditional leadership or authorities and municipalities to work together in the spirit to improve the livelihoods of local communities. The institution of traditional leadership must play a leading role in the local government in pursuit of socio-economic development. For instance, if traditional leaders were to play an effective role in the interest of its communities, the quality of services provided by the municipalities would be improved and consequently minimise the effects of the

Corona virus.

Traditional Leadership Rural Area in Curbing the Spread of the Global Pandemic

Despite the roles that traditional leaders play on an ongoing basis, during COVID-19 pandemic traditional leaders were tasked with new responsibilities. The role of traditional leadership in ensuring service delivery remains unchanged despite the spread of the COVID-19. However, COVID-19 has changed the way or methods of rendering services across all spheres government to contain the spread of the virus. Companies, municipalities including traditional leaders where force to maintain social-distancing (1.5 Meters) in rendering services. This conference paper also discusses the role played by traditional leaders in rural areas during COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the deputy president of the Republic of South Africa, David Mabuza (2020), the role of traditional leadership, as leaders closest to the people is very important in assisting the government containing the spread of the new infection. Therefore, Dziva (2020) also indicated that citizens often listen and abides by the traditional leaders' calls and pleas to stay at home, practical personal hygiene and social-distancing (1.5 Meters) as per regulations declared during a national lockdown. Dziva (2020) further indicated that the institution of traditional leadership together with the local government and other stakeholders raised community awareness to mitigate the virus and to ensure national lockdown regulations compliance.

More specifically, Poswa (2020) indicated that the role of traditional leaders in the fight against the spread of COVID-19 has thus far been pro-active in rural areas. He indicated several imperative roles played for the traditional leadership in assisting the government to contain the spread of this pandemic;

- Suspension of the initiation schools or season
- Suspension of gathering and funerals
- The handling out of hands sanitizers to community members
- Issuing of the permit by traditional leaders
- Promotion of access to information e.g. awareness
- Assisting the government and other stakeholders with the distribution of food parcels
- Ensuring compliance of the national lockdown regulations

Above are some of the roles rendered by traditional leaders in assisting the government to tackle the virus. Although these roles may not look substantial in the fight against COVID-19, on the bigger picture such cannot be underestimated.

Legislative Frameworks Governing Traditional Leadership in South Africa

The institution of traditional leadership is recognised by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. The debate about its relevance has been ongoing even before South Africa gained independence. However, this section provides an overview of pieces of legislation governing traditional leaderships in South Africa. In terms of section 211-212 within auspices of Chapter 12 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, provided for the introduction of national legislation, to determine the roles of traditional leadership at the local level. It also provided

for the national and provincial legislation that gave power to the establishment of National and Provincial Houses of Traditional Leaders, to address the roles of the traditional leaders, customary law and the customs of those communities that observe a system of customary law. Traditional leadership are also regulated by the Local Government: Municipal Structures Act of 1998. In terms of section 81 (1) of the Local Government: Municipal Structures Act 1998 (Act 117 of 1998), provided that the traditional authorities should observe a system of customary law in the area of a municipality, may participate through their leaders, identified in terms of subsection (2), in the proceedings of the council of that municipality and those traditional leaders must be allowed to attend and participate in any meeting of the municipal council. The Act further indicate that before a municipal council takes a decision on any matter directly affecting the area of traditional authority, the council must allow the leader of that authority to express a view on that matter.

The Local Government: Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act, 2003 (Act 41 of 2003), provided for the socio-economic development of their communities. Traditional leaders should also disseminate information about government policies and programmes. Section 5 (1) encouraged the formation of partnerships between municipalities and traditional leaders. This implies that traditional authorities had the necessary power to represent their communities. In terms of section 23 of the Local Government: Municipal Systems Act, 2000 (Act 32 of 2000), confer municipalities to pursue a developmental approach in their planning, to fulfil the objectives of local government, as set out in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996. It is evident that traditional authorities must play their role in this planning, as this is recognised by the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act, 2003 (Act 41 of 2003).

Lastly but not least, in terms of section 152 of the White Paper on Local Government, 1998, provides effect to these developmental duties, as required by section 153 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. This compels municipalities to co-operate with other organs of State and to contribute to the progressive realisation of the fundamental rights as enshrined by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996. The White Paper on Local Government, 1998, further provided the role of Traditional Leaders and those of elected local government.

Musitha (2013) indicated that the White paper on Local Government, 1998, provides functions of traditional leaders *inter alia*; Traditional leaders should act as head of the traditional authority, and as such exercising limited legislative power and certain executive and administrative powers; they should also preside over customary law courts and maintaining law and order; they must consult with traditional communities over lekgotla; they should also assist members of the community in their dealings with the State; they should advise the government on traditional affairs, through the houses of traditional leaders; they must convene meetings to consult with communities on needs and priorities, and to provide information; traditional leaders should be the spokespersons for their communities; and traditional leaders should continue to be the custodians and protectors of the community's customs and general welfare (White Paper on Local Government, 1998:75). The White Paper on Local Government, 1998, also includes the roles in the development of the local area and

community. Traditional leaders should make recommendations on land allocation and the settling of land disputes, lobbying government and other agencies for the development of their areas, to ensure that the traditional community participates in decisions on development and contributes to development costs. They also make recommendations to authorities on trading licences in their areas. Therefore, it can be argued that indeed traditional leaders complied with their role and responsibilities as indicated by different pieces of legislation. For instance, in Eastern Cape, North West and Kwa-Zulu natal, Poswa (2020) indicated that traditional leaders had played a pivotal role in tackling the spread of COVID-19 pandemic by fosters access to information relevant to the pandemic and acted an advisory in assisting the government.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper interrogated the role of traditional leadership on local sphere government during COVID-19 Pandemic. As a comparative study, the paper examined both roles played by traditional leadership in fostering service delivery in local government and the roles played in tackling COVID-19 pandemic. It is evident that traditional leadership or authority form part of public administration. Therefore, different pieces of legislation that recognises the status and identification of the institution of traditional leaders have been analysed. Even though, they don't explain their role clearly. The role of traditional leadership in local government is to improve the livelihoods of local communities, improve governance through their participation in development planning and projects, improve service delivery and lastly to solve problems and issues faced by their communities. Thus, traditional leaders can also assist the government in solving health-related issues like COVID-19 pandemic. This paper recommends that the role of traditional leadership in local government needs to be redefined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 and other pieces of legislation as they do not clearly point out the role of traditional leaders in all spheres of government.

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