Effectiveness of Traditional Leaders in Engaging Communities on Development Matters in Vhembe District of South Africa

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ABSTRACT The present research study brings out the findings of a case study on the perceptions of elected and traditional leaders with respect to how effective they engage communities on development issues. Fourteen villages in nine Traditional Leadership Councils within Makhado, Mutale and Thulamela local Municipalities of Vhembe District were selected using the stratified random sampling technique to participate in the study. Fourteen Councillors whose Wards covered the villages were interviewed together with members of Headmen Councils. One hundred and twelve focus group discussions and 14 key informant interviews were conducted. A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data, with a tape recorder serving as an assistive device. Interview transcripts and field notes were analysed using the inductive approach. Traditional leaders were reported to be effective in engaging communities, resulting in people-centred decisions being made; they planned and held regular, well-attended meetings that involved residents of the areas under their jurisdiction. The meetings took place on days and at times most convenient to the local community; and they presided over discussions that dealt with matters of real concern to grassroots communities. The unearthed mechanisms for effective community engagement might help to reduce the increasingly common service delivery protests. Besides, the study clarifies how to achieve ownership of community development initiatives. Lastly, ideas on the appropriate mechanisms for effective community engagement are evident.