

Community Participation in South African Local Government

ideas ⁴²



Helping more people voice their perspectives through a civic engagement platform

Public participation in local policymaking fosters accountability in government and ensures that development policies meet the needs of constituents. However, officials and civil society may struggle to engage communities. We worked with a civic technology organization in Cape Town, South Africa, to identify behavioral barriers to public participation in community development planning throughout the Western Cape and design solutions to improve participation.

Summary

The South African constitution mandates that municipalities involve constituents when crafting their five-year community development plans, called Integrated Development Plans (IDP). During the planning process, municipal officials solicit community input on topics such as service delivery, public park maintenance, and neighborhood safety, and encourage resident involvement through community meetings, social media accounts, and broadcast radio. Nonetheless, despite a growing focus on the importance of involving communities across governments, academia, and non-governmental organizations, **municipalities across South Africa continue to struggle with low participation in the IDP process.** Both local officials and residents stand to benefit from low-cost innovations that improve public participation and foster inclusive governance.

Highlights

- ▶ Public participation in policy-making can allow constituents to provide input on desired community change, but there is low participation in the process.
- ▶ Helping individuals see that their participation matters, clarifying the process, and leveraging social influence can help increase participation.
- ▶ Removing hassles through well-designed civic technology can also help increase participation.

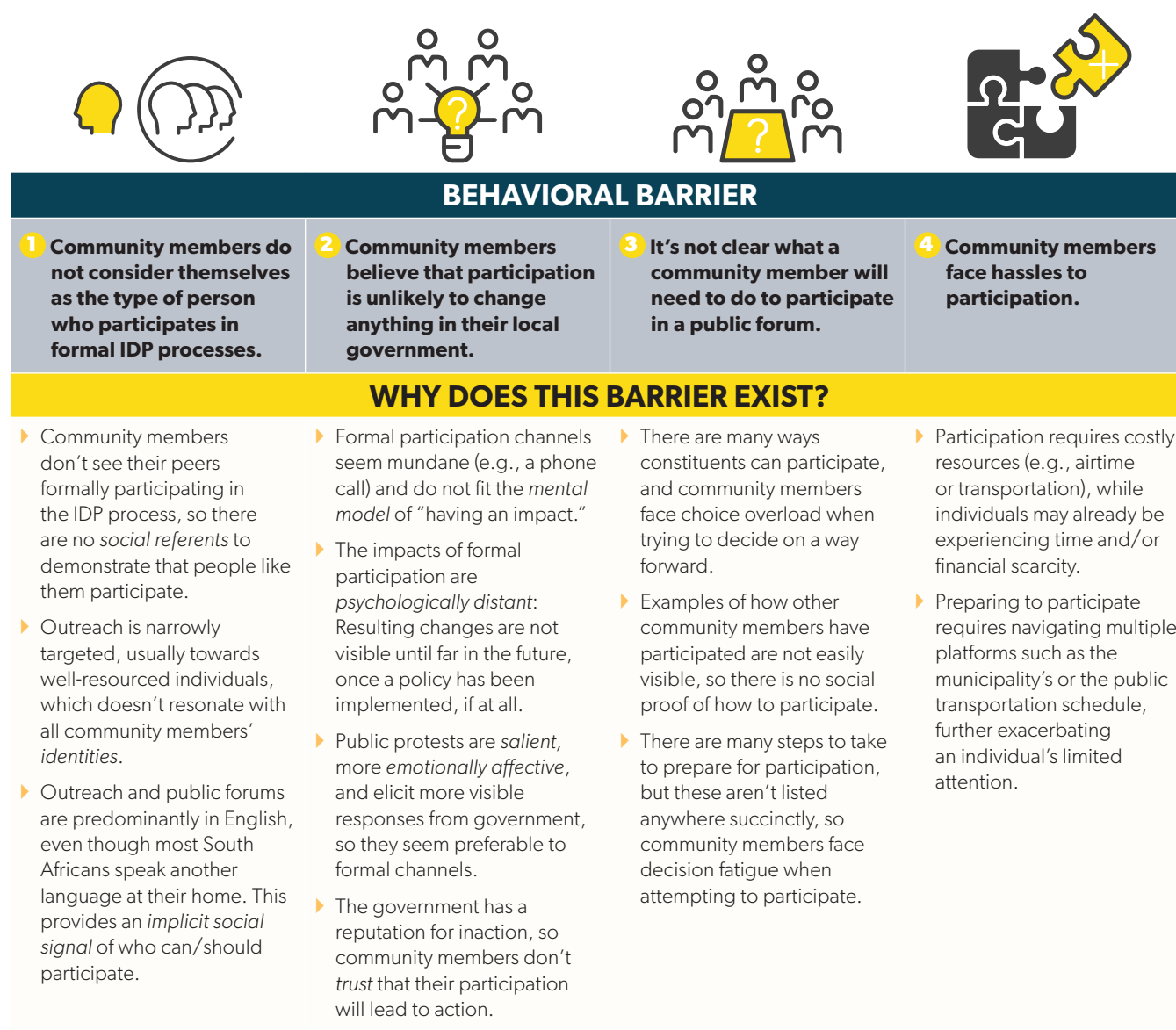
Many complex factors contribute to limited public participation in the IDP process. Using key insights from behavioral science, we sought to understand how community members perceive themselves, their government, and the participation process. ideas42 collaborated with OpenUp—a civic technology organization based in Cape Town, South Africa—to design solutions to increase community engagement. The final solutions, which are currently being implemented by OpenUp, include an improved public-facing digital tool that provides information on the IDP process and eliminates hassles to participation, as well as a youth accountability program that facilitates youth engagement. These solutions ultimately aim to foster more responsive policy and improve government-constituent relationships, in line with ideas42's long-term commitment to help improve government responsiveness around the world through behavioral science.

Challenges and Behavioral Barriers

OpenUp builds civic technology, makes public data more readily available, and provides data literacy trainings to both municipal officials and community members. One of the civic technologies developed by

OpenUp is a mobile-based platform for residents that provides detailed information on how community members can engage in their municipality's IDP process. For instance, the platform describes different documents published by the municipality and details upcoming events where community members can engage directly with officials. Nonetheless, the information provided by OpenUp's platform alone is not enough to drive engagement, largely because residents must make several decisions (such as decide if they'd rather go to a meeting or call their official directly) and take many additional steps (like organizing transport or writing down a phone number) to participate. Through extensive desk research, conversations with key stakeholders, and collaborative workshops with the OpenUp team, ideas42 gathered insights to better understand what prevents community members from following through with participation. Our work revealed four key behavioral barriers that prevent constituents from publicly voicing their opinions during local policymaking (See Figure 1).

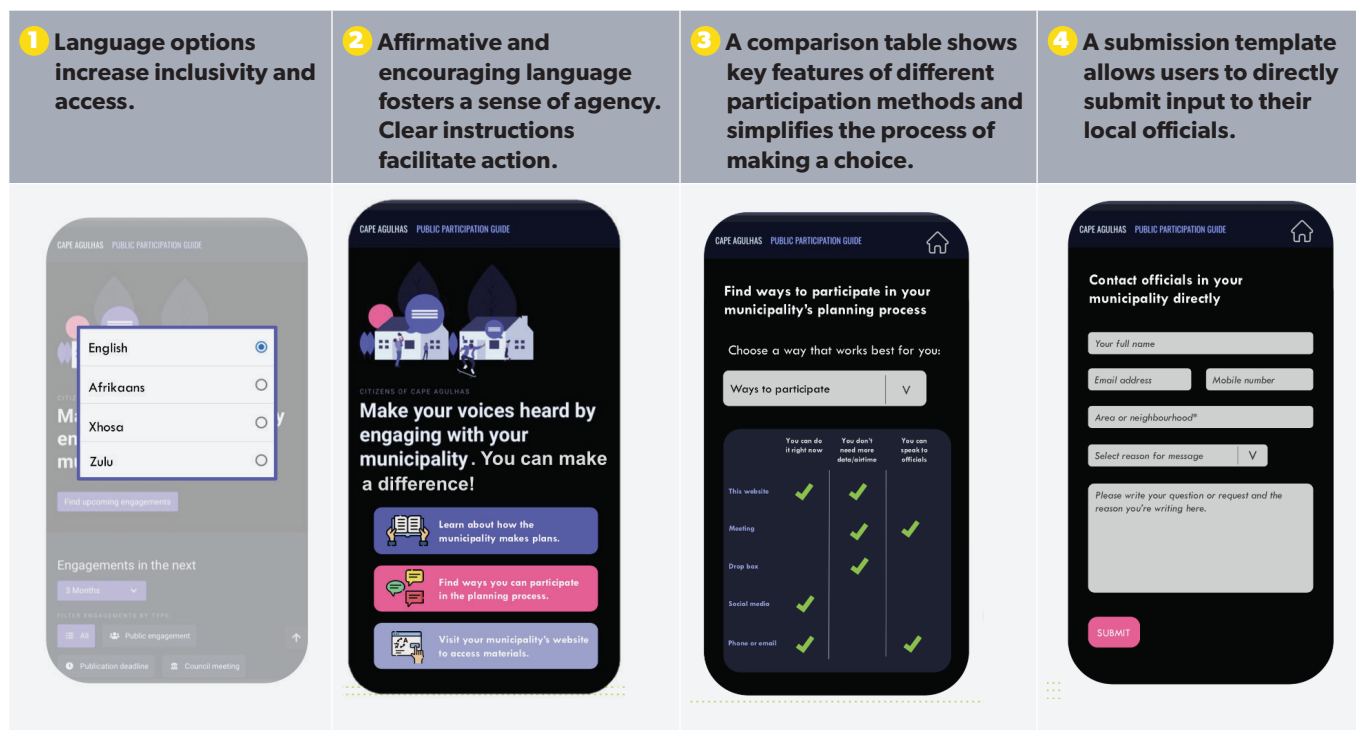
FIGURE 1. **Behavioral Barriers**



Designing Solutions

Drawing on the four key behavioral barriers, we worked alongside OpenUp to generate low-cost, light touch solutions to improve their public participation digital platform (see Figure 2). Firstly, to help individuals see themselves as active participants in local government and to bolster the idea that a community member's individual participation matters, we added more inclusive and identity-affirming language to the digital platform. Second, in order to make clear what is needed to participate in a public forum, we created a comparison page where community members can see different participation options and what is required for each. Lastly, we created a submission template on the platform where community members can directly submit new program ideas or feedback on the IDP to municipal officials, removing hassles from the participation process.

FIGURE 2. **Redesigned Public Participation Tool**



Finally, since youth civic participation has been an ongoing area of focus for South Africa, we designed a buddy system for members of OpenUp's existing youth empowerment program. The buddy system pairs-up youth members and provides them with a plan making conversation guide to help them follow through on their intentions to engage in the IDP process. The system facilitates participation by leveraging **social influence and reciprocity**, encouraging youth with common goals to work together to overcome resource constraints, such as a lack of transport or data access, and allowing participants to hold each other accountable for participation.

Next Steps

OpenUp plans to implement the redesigned digital participation tool and buddy system in mid-2021 and collect recommended monitoring and evaluation indicators throughout the beginning of the implementation period.

Lessons Learned for Improving Governance

Hassles to participation, feelings of disempowerment, and a lack of trust in government are barriers that can exist to varying degrees both elsewhere in South Africa and around the world. Understanding the subtle, context-specific ways in which individuals make decisions and take actions allows us to envision new, simple, and effective solutions to governance challenges that do not require costly resources to implement. The participatory nature of behavioral design also provides the opportunity for organizations, governments, and other stakeholders to build internal capacity in innovation so that they can independently develop tools and approaches to solve governance challenges in public participation and beyond.