EXPLORING THE NATURE AND MEANING OF PARTICIPATION IN THE TSITSA RIVER CATCHMENT: a question of epistemic (in)justice?

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the nature and meaning of participation to the different stakeholders in the Tsitsa Project in the Tsitsa River catchment, focusing on its implications for epistemic justice and sustainable natural resource management. Participation is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of sustainable resource management, yet its implementation often marginalises certain forms of knowledge, reinforcing existing power dynamics and undermining sustainability. Drawing on participatory governance theories and the concept of epistemic justice, this study aims to explore some of the power dynamics in the context of the Tsitsa Project (TP) and to advance both the conceptual understanding and practice of participation, and participatory governance.

The research is grounded in critical realism, a philosophical lens that aligns with the theory of complex social-ecological systems, enabling a deeper exploration of underlying structures and power dynamics. A narrative inquiry approach was employed to collect data, capturing the lived experiences and stories of community members, researchers, implementers, and government officials who participated in Tsitsa Project activities. To present the findings, poetic inquiry was utilized, offering a creative and reflective medium to convey the nuanced, affective dimensions of participation.

The findings reveal a tension between the hopes and frustrations that participants experience when entering the participatory space. Issues of tokenistic inclusion were also described, which were a source of dissatisfactory participatory experiences for those who experienced them, and thereby risked the promotion of an instrumental approach to participation as opposed to an emancipatory approach as intended. The exclusion of others in the form of tokenistic inclusion not only undermines inclusive decision-making but also perpetuates historical injustices—including epistemic injustice.

The thesis argues for a reimagining of participation that centres on recognising and legitimising diverse epistemologies. By fostering equitable knowledge-sharing platforms, participatory processes can contribute to more just and sustainable outcomes. This work advances the understanding of participation as a vehicle for epistemic justice and provides practical recommendations for inclusive governance in the Tsitsa catchment and beyond.

TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

Acronym	Full form
AM	Adaptive Management
ANC	African National Congress
APP	Adaptive Planning Process
CBNRM	Community-Based Natural Resources Management
CITES	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species
CLO	Community Liaison Officer
CMA	Catchment Management Agency
CMF	Catchment Management Forum
CoP	Community of Practice
CSES	Complex Social-Ecological System
DEA	Department of Environmental Affairs
DFFE	Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
DST	Department of Science and Technology
DWA	Department Water Affairs
DWS	Department of Water and Sanitation
IAP2	International Association of Participation
ICM	Integrated Catchment Management
IWM	Integrated Water Management
IWRM	Integrated Water Resources Management
LIMA	LIMA Rural Development Foundation
NEMA	National Environmental Management Act
NLEIP	Ntabelanga Laleni Environment and Infrastructure Project

NRM	Natural Resources Management
NWA	National Water Act
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PNRM	Participatory Natural Resources Management
SA	South Africa
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SGB	School Governing Board
SLM	Sustainable Land Management
TD	Transdisciplinary
TP	Tsitsa Project

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participatory engagements. The participation events are not the end – but rather the beginning of developing participatory governance. 292

DECLARATION

This thesis is my original work, and has not been submitted in part, or in full, for any degree or examination at any other university. It contains no material previously published or written by other individuals, except where due reference is made and/or acknowledgements are provided in the text. This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Water Resources Science, from the Institute for Water Research, Rhodes University, South Africa.

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REFLECTIVE PROLOGUE: ON CHOOSING POETIC INQUIRY

When I began this PhD in Water Resources Science, I did not expect poetry to enter the picture. My training had been in Environmental Water Management — a field governed by data, models, and maps — not line breaks and metaphor. Yet as I listened to the voices of people whose lives are deeply entwined with the landscapes and waters I was studying, I began to sense that conventional academic prose could not always carry the texture, rhythm, and emotional weight of their stories.

I am a Mosotho woman who came to South Africa after my first degree to study the governance and sustainability of natural resource management. My identity has always been shaped by the space between systems — between my home country and my adopted academic setting; between lived experience and technical expertise; between scientific rigour and the human stories it often abstracts away. It was in that space that poetic inquiry called to me.

Part of the decision was admittedly the excitement of doing something unconventional — perhaps even a little radical — in a scientific dissertation, taking a transdisciplinary approach. PhDs are meant to contribute something new to knowledge, but my choice was not made lightly. Poetic inquiry offered a way to distil data, to evoke meaning, and to foreground participant voices in a manner that could advance epistemic justice by resisting the erasure or flattening of their perspectives.

At the same time, I acknowledge a central paradox: in re-presenting participants' narratives as poems, I inevitably add another interpretive layer. Even when poems are crafted from participants' own words, they are shaped by my poetic and analytic choices — decisions about what to include, how to arrange it, what silences to preserve, and where to place emphasis. This is a form of interpretive power, and it carries the risk of becoming another kind of epistemic injustice if it distorts rather than honours participants' perspectives.

Not all participants were involved in the creation or refinement of the poems. In some cases, practical constraints prevented this; in others, it was not part of our agreed engagement. I sought participant reflection on their poems, not as "validation," but to open a space for dialogue. Some participants edited the poems, and all their changes were accepted an

presented in the final version of the findings, and others emailed their views (Appendix O. Still, this partial involvement is a limitation that I acknowledge.

To address these concerns, I made my process transparent: including excerpts of the original transcripts alongside poems (Appendix 3.1.1); keeping reflexive notes on the rationale for stanza breaks and word choices; and situating my interpretations within my positionality as a Mosotho woman navigating both local and academic worlds.

Rather than attempting to resolve the tension between amplification and imposition, I hold it visible throughout this thesis. The poems are not neutral vessels but co-constructions — shaped by the terrain of our encounters and the interpretive currents I bring. I invite the reader to approach them with this awareness, recognising both their potential to advance epistemic justice and their inherent limitations.

This reflection aligns with the theoretical concerns at the heart of this dissertation. Fricker's (2007) notion of *epistemic injustice* reminds us that marginalised groups are often wronged not only in the distribution of resources but also in their capacity to be knowers, whose contributions are taken seriously on their own terms. By re-presenting participants' narratives as poems, I occupy a position that could either help to counteract or inadvertently reinforce such injustices. Poetic inquiry, then, becomes both a methodological choice and an ethical responsibility — one that demands transparency, reflexivity, and attentiveness to power. In this thesis, I approach poetry not as an unmediated window into participants' experiences, but as a form of *situated knowledge* (Haraway, 1988; Klein et al., 2024), co-constructed within the relational, cultural, and disciplinary contexts of the research. The intention is not to "speak for" participants, but to create an interpretive space where their voices can be heard in ways that conventional scientific writing might not allow, while remaining conscious of the limits and risks of this approach.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Overview

The increasing loss of natural resources, especially in developing countries, has raised growing concern at various levels—including the international level—due to the threat this loss poses to the livelihoods of people who depend on them (Ewel, 2001; Wokekoro, Ozuruoke and Ihuah, 2021). This loss is driven by several direct factors, such as deforestation and overgrazing, which are themselves influenced by a range of underlying indirect factors including poverty, population pressure, and inadequate policy frameworks (Kaiser, 2021). Recognising the increased pressure and dependence on natural resources has led to the need to manage these resources in ways that consider diverse interests by engaging actors other than government officials, conservationists, and ecologists.

This study is situated in a rural catchment in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. A large government-funded restoration project included societal benefits in its objectives, and the project drew in a wide range of actors. The study engages critically with the experiences of some of these actors and delves into the nature of participation, raising the question of epistemic injustice – or unfairness in the way knowledge is produced, disseminated and recognised in the space.

Chapter 1 starts with a broad overview that first considers ecosystem services as one lens on people and ecosystems, then moves on to natural resources management (NRM) and the nature of landscapes as *complex* social-ecological systems, with a consequent need for governance – and particularly participatory governance. In Chapter 1, I examine actors in NRM in the context of South Africa, which lays the foundation for understanding the specific context of this study: the Tsitsa River Catchment, in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The chapter concludes with this thesis's focus, aim, and objectives.

1.1.1 People and Ecosystems

Ecosystem services are the direct and indirect benefits that are derived from the environment (Ewel, 2001; Van Oudenhoven *et al.*, 2018). People depend on natural resources and their ecosystem services to meet social, economic, political, and other human needs. Ecosystem services are categorised into regulating services, provisioning services, cultural services, and

supporting services (Millennium Assessment, 2005). Regulating services are those that control or regulate changes in the environment, such as trees providing air quality by removing pollutants, and other plants preventing water run-off and erosion. Provisioning services are material or energy outputs, such as food, biomass, fuel, freshwater, and fibre. Cultural services are the non-material things that people derive from the ecosystem, such as sense of place, existence, values, tourism and recreation (Chan *et al*., 2012). Supporting services provide living spaces for plants and animals, and also maintain their diversity such as soil formation, nutrient recycling, and water recycling. These services are important for human existence and must be maintained to support human needs (Ewel, 2001; Millenium Assessment, 2005). The value people place on particular ecosystem services determines how they choose to protect and manage the ecosystems around them. This means that the delivery of ecosystem services depends on the interactions between people and ecosystems (Balvanera *et al*., 2017).

The need to maintain the continued provision of ecosystem services has been formally or institutionally informed through the sustainability discourse (Lockwood, 2010; Schroter *et al*., 2017). Sustainability refers to striving for a world that can take care of the needs of the natural environment and the people who depend on it, both now and in the future. Sustainability is about how we live now so that future generations can also thrive; sustainable development is therefore development that meets current needs without compromising the needs of future generations. The discourse on sustainable development became formalised through the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, and the adoption of the United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs) in 2015 to address global challenges such as poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice (United Nations Global Impact, 2018). The agreement to strive towards sustainability was signed and adopted by many nations.

However, the commitment to work towards sustainability is implemented in many different ways, such as integrated water resource management (IWRM) (Agarwal *et al.*, 2000; Toit and Pollard, 2008; Hassing *et al.*, 2009; Haigh, Fox and Davies-Coleman, 2010; Pollard and du Toit, 2011; Palmer and Munnik, 2018), integrated catchment management (ICM) (Ashton, 2000; Falkenmark, 2004; Rowntree, 2006; Maneewan and Van Roon, 2017), adaptive management (AM) (Williams *et al*., 2020), integrated watershed management (IWM), participatory natural

resource management (PNRM) (Curtis and Lockwood, 2000; Reed *et al.*, 2009; Mbuvi, Ayiemba and Kagombe, 2015), community-based natural resources management (CBNRM) (Wilson *et al.*, 2003; Kay and Takenaka, 2006), the ecosystem approach (Tallis and Kareiva, 2005), landscape conservation, sustainable landscape management (SLM) (Cockburn *et al.*, 2018; Wang and Aenis, 2019), and many other similar approaches that encompass the integrated management of land and water ecosystems and the people who depend on them. There are different ways in which natural resource management (NRM) has shifted from top-down approaches to newer paradigms. These newer paradigms aim at greater sustainability by recognising that NRM takes place within complex contexts, where a diverse range of factors (human and non-human bio-physical) interact to give rise to the issues that are being managed.

1.1.1 Natural Resource Management

The concept of natural resource management (NRM) is about taking care of the health of natural landscapes – which include land, water, air, soil, plants and animals (Reed *et al.*, 2016) – while considering the needs and livelihoods of the people who depend on them, both now and in the future (Reed *et al.*, 2016; Australian, 2021). Natural resources management is usually applied within a watershed, river basin, or catchment, the landscape of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems where freshwater flows into the ocean (Palmer and Munnik, 2018). Catchment landscapes include social and biophysical elements that interact, comprising complex social-ecological systems (CSESs) (Palmer *et al*., 2022; Folke *et al*., 2016). Effective management of natural resources requires an understanding of these complex systems and the recognition that human activities and environmental processes are deeply intertwined. According to Biggs et al (2022), effective natural resources management requires understanding and engaging with the complexity of the CSESs.

1.1.2 The role of complexity in complex social-ecological systems and natural resources management

Complex social-ecological systems are dynamic and interconnected systems that encompass both human and ecological components, where human actions and natural processes influence each other in a complex manner. They involve complex interactions and feedback loops between social, economic, and ecological elements, often spanning different scales and

levels of organization. It is useful to consider the implications of complexity in CSESs (Audouin *et al*., 2013; Cilliers, 2000; Preiser *et al*., 2018).

A system refers to a set of elements that make up a whole (Ackoff, 1994; Ison, 2010; Wellmanns and Schmiemann, 2020). A system is greater than the sum of its parts because together the parts give rise to behaviour that is far different from that of any of the individual parts (Ackoff, 1994; Mehren *et al.*, 2018). The collective behaviour of a complex system means that it would be insufficient to manage the system by dissecting it into different parts instead of approaching it holistically. In addition, complex systems, especially social and natural systems, may have infinitely connecting elements (Cilliers, 2000), so it is necessary to define the boundaries of a particular system of interest. Such boundaries may be porous, with influences beyond the system of interest (Weaver *et al.*, 2017). Anything beyond the selected boundaries of a system forms part of that system's environment and wider context (Cilliers *et al*., 2013; Ison, 2010).

Complex systems have particular characteristics (Audouin et al., 2013; Cilliers, 2000; Preiser, 2018). In complex systems, relationships among the system elements result in collective behaviour of the system and influence how the system interacts with its environment (Ladyman *et al.*, 2013). Complex systems are characterised by the interactions among the elements, giving rise to multiple and unpredictable system behaviour (Rind, 1999; Meadows, 2008; R. L. Ison, 2010). The characteristics of a complex system include connectivity; non-linearity; feedback loops; memory; emergence; history; and context dependence (Cilliers *et al*., 2013). The following definitions offer context for the ways in which this dissertation engages with concepts.

Rich interactions: The interactions within a complex system are rich in nature, so even though an element may only interact with a few other elements that are within close range within the system, the impacts may be felt across the larger system (Cilliers et al., 2013).

Open and context-dependent: Complex social-ecological systems are open, and are constantly interacting with their external environment, which means that they are far from equilibrium (Cilliers, 2000). Being open also means that complex systems cannot be understood without the consideration of their context, making them context-dependent (Wong, 2018).

Non-linearity: Complex social-ecological systems exhibit non-linear dynamics, where the level or amount of impact may not necessarily be proportional to the results of the impact, and vice versa (Newbold *et al*., 2020; Folke *et al*., 2005). That is, small causes do not always lead to small effects, and vice versa. Non-linearity is one of the key properties of a complex system (Cilliers, 2000) and non-linear behaviour leads to increased difficulty in determining cause and effect relations, and therefore an inability to make future predictions.

Feedback loops: Feedback loops are related to non-linearity. Feedback loops are cycles of interactions between the elements of a system leading in a particular direction to linked outcomes, which lead to other linked outcomes in turn (Wellmanns and Schmieemann, 2021). The interactions among the elements of a system lead to different impacts, either positive or negative feedbacks, enhancing or deteriorating results (Roux, 2011, Clifford-Holmes *et al*., 2016). In NRM for instance, a (negative) feedback loop can be when the scarcity of water leads to conflicts between those who share the water, but then, the conflict could lead to more alliances between certain members of the groups, which reinforces good relations.

Memory and adaptability: Complex systems also have a history that is embedded in the memory that informs how they re-organise themselves to respond to different impacts (Luksha, 2005). In this light, history plays a vital role in determining the system's function and behaviour. Even though NRM may be undertaken in two villages to achieve similar goals, the way each village takes on the activities may be completely different due to the different histories and memories embedded within each area in terms of how to respond to different impacts. The idea of memory highlights the need to consider context when dealing with complex systems because the context is embedded in the memory and history of a system, which also determines their ability to self-organise to adapt to change (Folke *et al.*, 2005, 2016).

Emergent properties: Through the process of emergence, a complex system exhibits characteristics that are collectively different from those of any of the individual elements that make up the whole as a result of their interconnections and interactions (Ginoux *et al*., 2017). For example, river water quality depends on location, size, depth, geology, soil type, rainfall, surrounding land use activities, and other factors, some of which may not be direct or even visible to the naked eye. When considered individually, the factors perform distinct functions, but collectively they generate system-level behaviour that is qualitatively different from the

sum of their parts. Through the ongoing processes of interaction, new patterns and properties arise, enabling the system as a whole to adapt to external influences (Cotsaftis, 2009). The process of emergence also means that predictive methods of management would also not be effective in a complex system, especially those targeting single elements of a system (Cotsaftis, 2009). Adaptive responses are more helpful (Rogers *et al*. 2013).

In this way, an understanding and adoption of complex social-ecological systems (CSESs) can improve the efficiency and efficacy of management decisions in the context of NRM when dealing with multiple interactions (Cilliers *et al*., 2013; Ison, 2010). By integrating social and ecological considerations, and identifying and nurturing positive feedback, natural resources management can contribute to the well-being of both human societies and the environment.

It is useful to consider the implications of complexity in CSESs. Drawing on the CSES framing in NRM allows for the appreciation of the strong interdependencies among the different elements of the system (Audouin *et al.*, 2013; Cockburn *et al.*, 2018). To translate the management of CSESs into practice requires different stakeholders from different sectors of society to interact with government-appointed resource managers in new ways over time to get a deeper understanding of the system (Olsson, Folke and Berkes, 2004; Berkes, 2009). These new ways of interacting among government sectors and other sectors of society are referred to as participatory governance (Lockwood *et al*., 2010; Turton *et al*., 2007). This study focuses on participatory governance, with particular attention to the lived experiences of participation.

1.1.3 Participatory governance as an innovative form of governance

Participatory governance refers to the establishment of spaces in which the state and general citizens engage on public matters in new ways that transform the boundaries between them (Fischer, 2006b; Friedman, 2006; Palumbo, 2017). In participatory governance, emphasis is placed on involving and engaging citizens as well as those in other prominent sectors, like business, which makes it possible to enable the voices of the previously excluded to be heard (Wong, 2018). Participatory governance is characterised by the meaningful involvement of a variety of stakeholders who either just have an interest in or will be affected by the decisions made about natural resources.

By engaging local communities, civil society organizations, government and non-governmental agencies, and other relevant actors in natural resources management, participatory governance aims to enhance inclusivity, transparency, and accountability (Lockwood *et al*., 2010). Participatory governance is seen to have a better chance of recognising and clarifying complex problems that cannot be dealt with through traditional forms of management because of its flexibility and democratic nature (Lockwood *et al.*, 2010). Participatory governance can lead to more effective and appropriate resource utilization and foster communities of learning that bring together indigenous or local people, academics, and managers (Robson et al., 2009), aligning with what Turton et al. (2007) describe as the government–society–science "trialogue" governance model.

However, this potential is not always realized in practice—for instance, Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE programme, despite being an early exemplar of participatory governance in natural resource management, ultimately suffered from elite capture, diminished community benefits, and weakened local accountability amidst shifting political and economic conditions (Balint & Mashinya, 2006; Mapedza, 2007).

Given the inherent complexity in managing natural resources, participatory governance is about decision-making in a context of competing attitudes, beliefs, values, and social norms, which also depend on various factors (Hooper, 2005; Turton *et al.*, 2007). An attitude refers to a consistent way in which a person feels or views a given object. Beliefs refer to how a person comes to accept something as true, which in turn determines their attitude towards it. Values are the underlying principles on which a person's actions and attitudes rely like beliefs, except that values are more internalised and harder to adapt (Rogers *et al*. 2013). Social norms are the collective manners that determine how a group of people act in the world, which may either be explicitly or implicitly agreed upon. Managing natural resources for sustainability requires addressing deeper systemic issues and governance (Fischer and Riechers, 2019); therefore, we need processes that surface these often hidden factors that influence decision-making, and my research hopes to highlight some of these hidden factors through the exploration of people's experiences of participation.

The idea of decision-making is important in relation to participatory governance, and refers to a process of making choices out of a variety of options provided towards some required or desired outcome (Bruce, 2005; Hooper, 2005). Participatory decision-making is about making

these choices while being inclusive or considerate of the competing attitudes, beliefs and values of the actors involved in participatory governance.

1.1.4 Participation in relation to natural resources management and participatory governance

Participatory governance can be a pathway for people to benefit from natural resource management decisions and have their voices considered in effecting change because of its emphasis on the process of learning and experimentation (Lockwood *et al*., 2010; Thompson, 2007). Participatory governance strives to ensure the representation of marginalized and vulnerable groups who may have traditionally been excluded from decision-making processes. Efforts are made to address power imbalances and promote equitable participation (Andress and Purtill, 2020; Wong, 2018).

Participating stakeholders in decision-making can increase the adaptability of social-ecological systems by considering various viewpoints, encouraging cooperation, and adjusting to changing circumstances (Armitage, Berkes and Doubleday, 2020). This participation by a variety of stakeholders promotes inclusivity by providing opportunities for all the stakeholders to contribute their perspectives, knowledge, and concerns. It recognises that diverse stakeholders bring different experiences, expertise, and values to the decision-making process, which is valuable for a better understanding of resources of interest, and especially CSESs (Folke et al., 2021).

The participation of stakeholders in processes aimed at promoting participatory governance can be empowering and promote capacity building when stakeholders develop the relevant knowledge and skills to make informed contributions (Kamruzzaman and White, 2017). Through the principle of ensuring transparency, participatory governance encourages the sharing of information and knowledge so that all stakeholders effectively contribute to decision-making.

The creation of space for all these knowledge types facilitates productive dialogue, collaboration, and the resolution of possible conflicts that may arise during NRM. Allowing for the diverse interests and knowledge types to come together could lead to transformation in participants' understanding and perception of the world; that is, a person's interests may

change or transform through their interactions with new ideas learned from other actors in the space (Ison, 2010; Rettberg, 2005; Turnhout, Bomel and Aarts, 2010).

Participatory governance aims to enhance inclusivity, transparency, and accountability by engaging local communities, civil society organizations, government agencies, and other relevant actors in NRM and helps to navigate the surprise and uncertainty brought by CSESs. Participatory governance can promote collective action and shared responsibility, leading to more sustainable NRM practices in a CSES.

The transition from government to governance is accompanied by several challenges. The delineation of power boundaries often becomes ambiguous, which may limit the extent to which citizens perceive themselves as empowered actors. Furthermore, decision-making processes are typically prolonged, as they must accommodate a plurality of perspectives and interests. In cases where environmental issues are highly technical, extensive citizen participation may generate demands for less costly livelihood options that directly conflict with proposed interventions.

1.1.5 Assumptions underpinning participatory governance in natural resources management

There are several common assumptions about participatory governance in NRM. Participatory governance claims to lead to sustainable solutions and to empower vulnerable people in society, yet the evidence of consistent usefulness is patchy (Wamba, 2017). Various assumptions underpinning this approach need to be explored.

Participatory governance as a good thing

The assumption that participatory governance is inherently good and useful often stems from proponents' emphasis on the benefits of people's involvement. However, there are also many critics of this approach, who highlight how power dynamics can exacerbate the marginalisation of minority groups (Cooke and Kothari, 2001), how decision-making may be delayed by the need to accommodate multiple opinions, and how divergent perspectives can lead to conflict. Moreover, the process may appear to reflect the collective will, while in practice obscuring the wants and needs of those most marginalised (Smith, 2009).

The state does not already have measures in place to decentralize

The assumption here is that states do not already have decentralization measures in place, whereas in many cases one finds that many states already have such decentralization measures in place, but they are not functioning as well as was hoped since they continue to perpetuate top-down structures where the powerful still play a major role (Brown, 2010). Friedman (2006) claims that, even though that may be the goal, participatory governance in the management of natural resources fails to give a voice to the poor because its implementation through new forums does not usually attract the marginalised, but those who already have a recognised voice in other platforms. Friedman's claim is similar to Ozuruoke's (2021) findings in the Nigerian context. It would be better if government opened up more to its citizens, allowing citizens to organise themselves in a way that best works for them, instead of the artificial mode of establishing new forums; that is, to allow for participatory governance to emerge in the context of a CSES (Friedman, 2006; Chaffin and Gunderson, 2016). In other words, the focus should be on existing forms of community organisations that could potentially align with the goals of a new initiative instead of trying to introduce new ones.

Rules in form vs rules in use

There is an assumption that because there are rules and regulations mandating government officials to include other actors, that that is enough to ensure effective participatory implementation (Brown, 2010). However, rules in form and rules in use differ greatly (Clifford-Holmes *et al*., 2016); just because the rules exist in a formal document mandating the inclusion of the public in decision-making processes does not mean that officials are doing this well and effectively in practice. Having good legal policies or frameworks does not necessarily translate into transformation of the prejudices held by those who are charged with the responsibility of implementation (mostly powerful) towards other members of the population (usually less powerful) (Williams, 2006).

General applicability

Another assumption, which is also a criticism of the concept of participation, is that participatory approaches are universally applicable (Wamba, 2017). Claiming universal applicability of participatory approaches ignores the complexity of the different contexts in which participatory NRM is applied, the individuals who make up the participatory space, and

the inequalities that exist among them (Brown, 2011; Li, 2017). Cleaver's (2012) concept of "bricolage" describes how actors creatively combine available social, institutional, and material resources to develop context-specific solutions, offering an adaptive approach to navigating complex and variable environments.

Many people are willing to participate

Another assumption is that many people are willing to take part in participatory NRM activities (Fischer, 2006). While there are reasons for people to participate in NRM, there are also many reasons for why they might be unwilling. These range from lack of time owing to work or other personal matters; lack of trust in the entity proposing the activity due to prior experiences with the particular entity or other similar ones; lack of perceived benefit from the activity either because it is irrelevant to the person or their community; and other physical barriers such as the distance to the venue or not being comfortable with the place where the event is going to take place (Brodie *et al*., 2009; Fischer, 2006).

1.1.6 The actors in natural resources management

In natural resource management and governance, several terms are used to identify the individuals and groups involved, each reflecting their specific roles and relationships to the resource. Common terms include actors, stakeholders, civil society, community, and the public. Each plays a distinct role in shaping how resources are managed and conserved.

Actors in NRM refer to all individuals, organizations, or institutions that play a role in managing or influencing natural resources. This includes a wide range of governance actors, from government agencies and private sector businesses to local communities and international organizations (Lebel *et al*., 2006). Actors can have varying degrees of power, responsibility, and influence over how natural resources are used and conserved, and their interactions shape governance systems.

Stakeholders are individuals or groups who have an interest in or are affected by natural resource management decisions. This can include local communities, government bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private companies. Stakeholders can be categorized as either primary (directly affected) or secondary (indirectly affected), and their inclusion in decision-making is crucial for equitable and sustainable NRM (Reed *et al*., 2009).

Civil society refers to non-state, non-market actors, including NGOs, community groups, advocacy organizations, and social movements that work to influence natural resource management and policy (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006). Civil society often engages in advocacy for sustainable practices, the rights of local communities, and environmental protection, frequently acting as intermediaries between the government, the private sector, and the public (Young, 2002).

Here's a revised version of your paragraph that addresses the examiner's comment by acknowledging the complexity and contested nature of the term "community":

In natural resource management (NRM), a community is often defined as a group of people, frequently in rural or indigenous areas, who live near and depend on natural resources for their livelihoods (Berkes, 2007). Communities are considered essential actors in NRM, particularly in community-based management models where local knowledge and participation in decision-making are valued (Armitage et al., 2009). They typically maintain close relationships with resources such as forests, fisheries, or agricultural land, and their sustainable management practices can play a key role in conservation efforts. However, it is important to recognize that the concept of "community" is highly contested. In practice, assumptions of shared interests, cohesion, or conviviality often overlook social divisions, power imbalances, and conflicts within these groups. For the purposes of this study, the term is used pragmatically to refer to local actors involved in NRM, while acknowledging the complexities and heterogeneity that such a label can obscure.

The public refers to the broader population that may not be directly involved in managing natural resources but is still impacted by how these resources are governed (Reed *et al*., 2018). Public participation in natural resource governance, especially through public consultations and participatory decision-making processes, is becoming more common as a way to ensure transparency and fairness in NRM (Fung, 2015).

The impact of each group's contribution towards the bigger picture is determined by the opportunity and respect received from the bigger group (Brittos and Rani, 2017; White, 1996).

I use the term "actor" to refer to those who take part in a given situation, as opposed to "stakeholder", which refers to those with a legitimate interest in a given situation but who may not necessarily take part. If proper care is taken to engage the public and include and

retain the voices of the communities involved, then social justice can be promoted (Fraser, 2000; Hampton, 2004). Turton et al.'s (2007) trialogue model of governance, encompassing the government, society, and science actor-clusters, is particularly valuable as it illustrates the diverse range of stakeholders represented within each cluster (Figure 1.1).

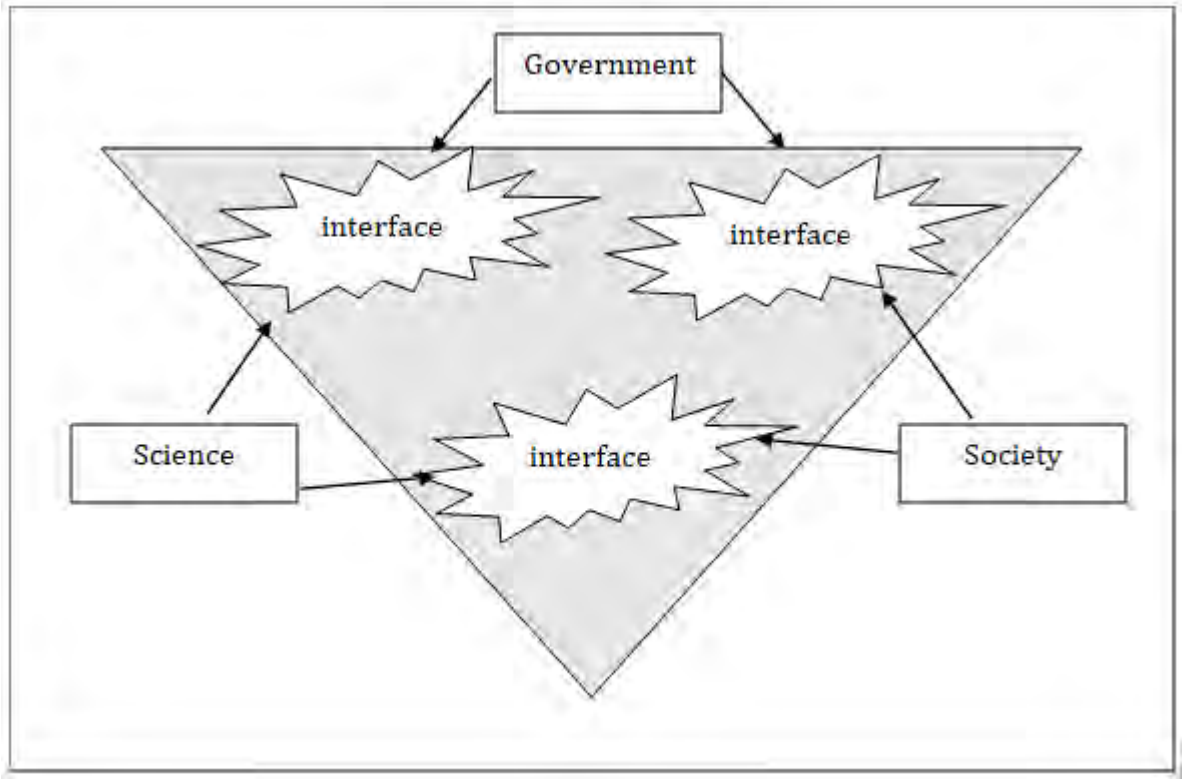


Figure 1.1: Natural resource governance as a trialogue among government-society-science, where relationships between the stakeholder groups take place at the interfaces, and the shaded area represents the process of governance (Turton et al., 2007).

Government actor-cluster

The government plays policy- and decision-making roles, as well as facilitating and enabling participatory governance mechanisms, which involves creating platforms and processes for citizens to engage in decision-making. Natural resource managers have a duty to bring together all stakeholders who are likely to be impacted by the decisions in any NRM space (Wilson *et al.*, 2003). In addition to convening stakeholders, government institutions should provide a conducive environment that encourages all those involved to contribute, and to be open to taking into consideration any information garnered through engagement processes when making decisions. In particular, government should encourage and assist the science

actors in creating solutions to increasingly complex challenges, and base policies on both evidence and the articulated requirements of society (Turton *et al*., 2007).

Governments can allocate resources to support participatory initiatives, such as funding for community projects or training for citizen engagement. However, a recurring issue with government-led participation is that government officials who invite other actors raise their expectations of influence, which are not always met in practice (Buuren *et al*., 2019). Government actors usually hold the controlling power in participatory NRM because they decide how much power to give, to whom, and when (Arboleda, 2014; Fabricius et al., 2004; Head, 2007). According to Koggel (2019), local communities, who are in most cases less powerful, are invited to participate in processes where they are expected to exercise both individual and collective agency. However, if those who do the inviting come into the space with most decisions already made, this may limit the local people's ability to exercise their agency and participate meaningfully (Arbodela, 2014; Kosko, 2013). When other people are limited in their ability to contribute, the process may end up being an instrumental approach (detailed description in Section 2.1.1).

Society actor-cluster

It is important to explore the underlying drivers of land degradation, which usually lie in the complex interactions between people and their natural environments (Arce-Nazario, 2007). Society, including individuals, communities, civil society organizations, and interest groups, actively participates in governance processes by providing input, feedback, and scrutiny. Citizen participation plays the important role of adding citizen expertise and knowledge of their area, as they have watched the changes take place over time and have an idea of what has worked for them in order to adapt to those changes. Their involvement is also important because they are the ones who need to resonate with the interventions so that they can take over the responsibility of caring for and maintaining the initiatives going forward (Park, Maria and Hewlett, 2010; Uittenbroek *et al.*, 2019).

Civil society can sometimes hold government institutions accountable for their decisions and actions, ensuring that they are responsive to the needs and interests of the public. As already mentioned in the definition of governance, the boundaries that have prevented government from understanding the real needs of the communities that they work in, can be transformed (Fischer, 2006; Turton *et al.*, 2007; Buuren, Meerkerk and Tortajada, 2019). The inclusion of

society is further important for building awareness and understanding of governance issues and mechanisms. Learning can empower citizens to engage meaningfully in decision-making processes (Lotz-Sisitka *et al*., 2015).

Ensuring diversity and inclusivity in participatory processes is important for representing the interests of all members of society, including marginalized and underrepresented groups.

Science actor-cluster

Strydom (2022) underscores that policymakers require credible scientific information to base decisions on, highlighting the role of scientific research in addressing societal needs and informing decision-makers. Scientific research and data analysis can inform policies and actions, helping to ensure that decisions are grounded in reliable information (Mills and Clark, 2001). Scientists and researchers often provide expertise to support participatory processes, helping to interpret data, assess risks, and identify solutions to complex problems (Letey, 1999; Turton *et al.*, 2007). Scientists and researchers need to frame their questions in a manner that allows them to be relevant to both decision-makers and society while remaining credible in the scientific community (Mills and Clark, 2001).

According to Palmer *et al*. (2023), using an adaptive systemic approach (ASA) in research can increase the chances of both ecological and social justice impact because ASA is more in line with CSESs due to its fundamental recognition of complexity, connectedness, co-learning and dedication to adaption.

Overall, effective participatory governance requires collaboration and cooperation among government, science, and society to foster transparency, accountability, and responsiveness in decision-making processes. By working together, these stakeholders can contribute to more inclusive and democratic governance systems that better serve the needs and aspirations of the population.

1.1.7 Natural Resources Management in South Africa

Natural resource management (NRM) in South Africa (SA) is critical due to the country's rich biodiversity and reliance on natural resources for both livelihoods and economic development (Shackleton *et al*., 2001). However, historical factors like apartheid policies and land dispossession have created disparities in access to these resources (Fabricius *et al*.,

2013). Recent NRM practices aim to address these inequalities while promoting sustainable use, conservation, and equitable distribution of benefits.

The management of natural resources is a key component of South Africa's attempts to safeguard the environment and promote sustainable development. Natural resources are abundant in South Africa, and appropriate management is necessary to guarantee their long-term availability and limit environmental deterioration. Minerals (such as gold, platinum, coal, and diamonds), arable land, water resources, forests, and biodiversity are a few of South Africa's key natural resources. Efforts to manage natural resources in South Africa continue to evolve as the country faces various environmental, social, and economic challenges. Sustainable development and equitable resource allocation remain central goals to protect the environment and improve the quality of life for all South Africans (NWRS, 2021).

Arable land is a valuable natural resource in SA, supporting agriculture and food production (Shackleton *et al*., 2001). Sustainable land management practices, such as crop rotation, soil conservation, and water-efficient irrigation, are promoted to maintain soil fertility and prevent land degradation (Maponya et al., 2019). South Africa faces water scarcity and variability due to climate conditions and increasing demand (Cookes et al., 2019). Efficient water management, including water conservation, recycling, and equitable distribution, is crucial to address these challenges and support various sectors, such as agriculture, industry, and households.

Forests are essential for biodiversity conservation, carbon sequestration, and providing ecosystem services (Reyers *et al*., 2009). South Africa has various forest types, and conservation efforts, reforestation, and sustainable forest management are undertaken to protect and preserve these vital ecosystems. South Africa is recognized for its rich biodiversity, including unique plants, animals, and ecosystems, such as the Fynbos and the Kruger National Park. Conservation efforts focus on protecting endangered species, establishing protected areas, and promoting sustainable ecotourism. The government has implemented policies such as the National Forests Act of 1998, which promotes sustainable forest management and biodiversity conservation (Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2018). Biodiversity conservation is also guided by the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act, 2004, which seeks to protect ecosystems and species from overexploitation (DEA, 2021).

South Africa, like many other countries, is vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Natural resources management includes adaptation strategies to mitigate the effects of climate change through sustainable practices (Noova *et al*., 2018; Twine, 2020).

South Africa has established various laws and regulations to guide natural resources management, including the National Environmental Management Act (NEMA), 1998, and the Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act (MPRDA), 2002. The NEMA serves as the overarching environmental law in South Africa. It provides the legal framework for environmental governance and sets out principles for sustainable development, including the precautionary principle, public participation, and environmental justice. The Act aims to foster cooperative governance and integrated environmental management across government sectors and communities (DEA, 2016). The MPRDA, 2002, focuses on regulating the mineral resources sector, emphasizing sustainable development and the protection of the environment while promoting equitable access to the country's mineral resources. Other frameworks include the National Water Act (NWA), 1998, and the Framework for Sustainable Development in South Africa (NFSD), 2008.

Effective governance and enforcement of these laws are vital for ensuring compliance and sustainable resource use. Involving local communities in natural resources management is essential for ensuring the sustainable use of resources and addressing socio-economic challenges in SA. Community-based natural resource management projects and partnerships aim to provide livelihood opportunities while promoting environmental stewardship (Fabricius *et al*., 2013).

The NRM frameworks are rooted in participatory governance and seek to empower communities to manage natural resources sustainably, thereby improving livelihoods while ensuring conservation goals are met. An example is the co-management of protected areas, where communities play a role in decision-making and benefit-sharing (Fabricius et al., 2004).

1.2 Context

1.2.1 The Tsitsa River Catchment

Bio-physical characteristics

Water does not respect political boundaries, and catchments are regarded as units for water resource management in South Africa (DWA, 1970; NWRS, 2021). The Tsitsa Catchment is

located in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. It is named after the Tsitsa River, which is a major river flowing through the region. The Tsitsa River is a tributary of the larger Mzimvubu River Catchment located in the Eastern Cape of South Africa (Le Roux, 2011), and is part of the Mzimvubu-Tsitsikama water management area, and the T35 A-E tertiary catchments (Figure 1.2) (NWRS 2, 2021; van Tol et al., 2014). The Tsitsa River originates in the foothills of the Drakensberg Mountain and flows until it pours into the Mzimvubu River (Le Roux and Sumner, 2012; Bannatyne *et al*., 2017), providing an important source of water for both agricultural and domestic use in the area. The Mooi, Inxu, and Pot Rivers are the main tributaries of the Tsitsa River (Figure 1.2). The catchment is characterised by steep topography, ranging between 2700 m and 600 m, and by high summer rainfall, between 600 mm and 1000 mm per year (Huchzermeyer and Rowntree, 2021; La Maitre *et al*., 2014). The catchment area encompasses a diverse range of landscapes, including mountains, valleys, and grasslands.

The Tsitsa Catchment is home to a diverse array of plant and animal species, including indigenous forests, grasslands, wetlands, and several endemic species (Smith-Adao *et al*., 2016). It is recognized for its ecological significance and is part of efforts to conserve biodiversity in South Africa. The catchment supports a variety of vegetation types, ranging from grasslands to forests, which play a crucial role in stabilizing soils, regulating water flow, and providing habitats for wildlife.

The Tsitsa River and its tributaries are important water sources for both human consumption and irrigation. However, like many rivers in South Africa, the Tsitsa River faces challenges such as pollution, over-extraction, and erosion, which impact water quality and availability and other ecosystem services that the communities depend on for their livelihoods (De Wet *et al*., 2018). The river's flow is influenced by seasonal rainfall patterns typical of the Eastern Cape, with peak flows often occurring during the wet season and reduced flows during the dry season.

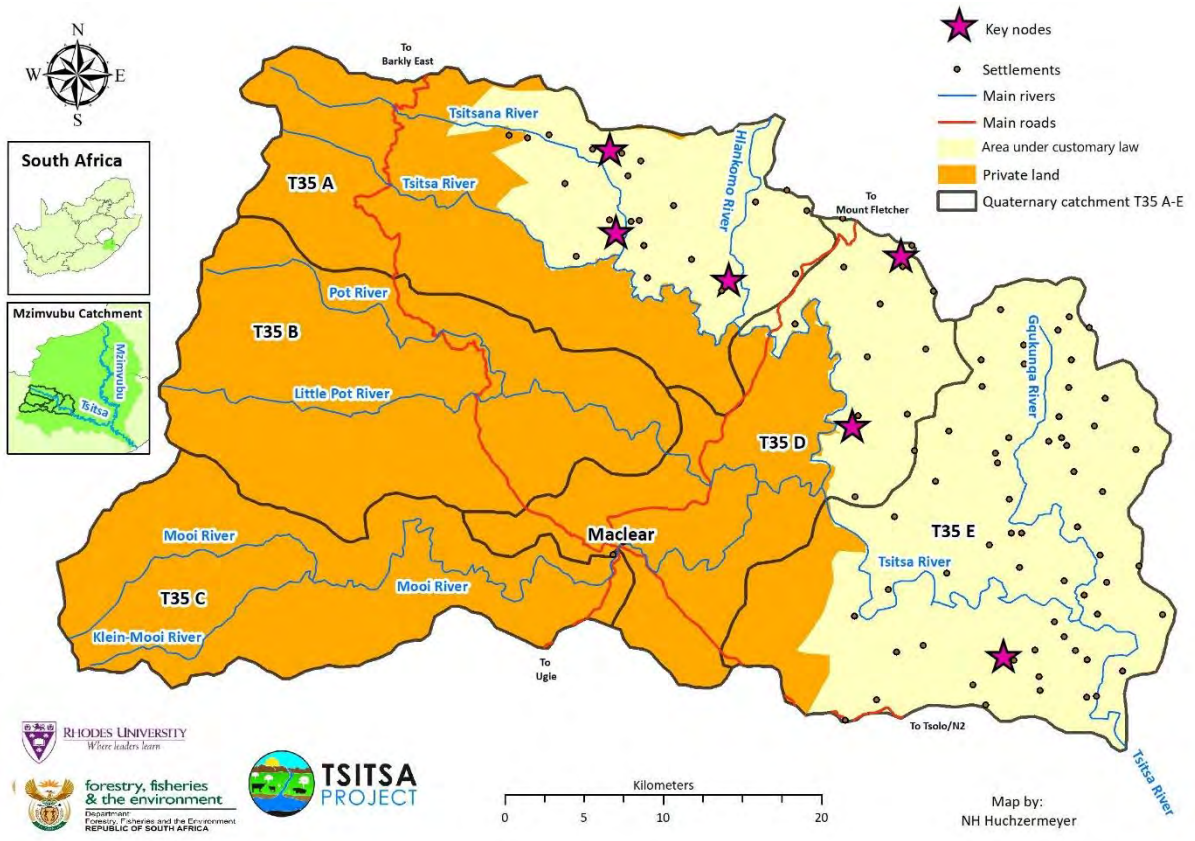


Figure 1.2: The Tsitsa River Catchment map showing how the area is used (Map by Huchzermeyer)

Environmental factors include steep, north-facing slopes (drier), low vegetation cover, and low organic content of soil (Le Roux, 2011). The geology of the area is dominated by mudstones and sandstone varying across the catchment, with mudstone making up most of the central parts (Le Roux, 2015). This gives rise to duplex soils that are highly erodible, and results in the high gully erosion that is evident in the middle and lower parts of the catchment (Powell *et al*., n.d.; van Tol *et al.*, 2014). The dispersive duplex soils are prone to tunnelling and made worse by the area's vulnerability to droughts and floods; dispersive owing to the high sodium content, and duplex, meaning made up of two distinct layers of sand at the top, and clay at the bottom, making them highly permeable at the top, but impermeable at the bottom, leading to long-lasting gullies.

Both environmental and historical human factors contribute to the highly degraded landscape (van Tol et al., 2014; DEA, 2019).

Social and economic characteristics

The social dynamics affecting residents, particularly black people, in the Tsitsa Catchment of the Eastern Cape, South Africa, are shaped by a variety of factors, including historical legacies, economic conditions, access to resources, and political structures.

Social and economic factors that contribute to the highly degraded landscape include historical political regimes, such as apartheid (Itzkin *et al*., 2021). Pre-1994 apartheid policies separated the population and placed the majority of the catchment's inhabitants far from urban centres, towards the middle of the catchment, which is where most of the highly erodible soils are found. Most of the Tsitsa River Catchment falls under a former homeland area called the Transkei, which was once an independent country known as the Republic of Transkei (Sigwela *et al*., 2017). It was a country independent from South Africa from 1976 to 1994, but was not globally recognised as a legal entity. It was one of the first to be declared independent by the apartheid policy on separate development, and for most of the time was a politically unstable area, ruled by a single party (Kakembo & Ndou, 2020. Predominantly occupied by amaXhosa people, it remained this way until 1994 (when it re-joined South Africa and became part of the Eastern Cape Province).

As a result, the land use and management practices in the area are highly influenced by traditional Xhosa customs and land tenure systems, which emphasize communal tenure, under the jurisdiction of traditional leaders (Osman, 2019; Fry *et al*., 2024). Land ownership patterns in the Tsitsa Catchment often reflect historical injustices (Ntsebeza, 2002), with much of the prime agricultural land owned by white farmers. This disparity in land ownership can limit opportunities for black residents to engage in farming and other land-based livelihoods. Access to land remains a contentious issue, and efforts to address land reform and restitution are ongoing but often face challenges. Land use in the Tsitsa Catchment is primarily agricultural, with subsistence farming and commercial agriculture being common practices. Agriculture is a significant economic activity in the catchment area. Farmers utilize the fertile soils and water resources of the Tsitsa River for crop cultivation, livestock grazing, and fruit orchards. Several communities reside within the Tsitsa Catchment, relying on its natural resources for their livelihoods (Fry et al., 2024). These communities engage in agriculture, fishing, and other activities closely linked to the environment.

Many residents of the communities within the Tsitsa Catchment experience economic marginalization, characterized by high levels of unemployment, poverty, and limited access

to basic services (Fry *et al*., 2024). Economic opportunities in these communities are often scarce, and persistent income disparities further exacerbate socio-economic inequalities among local residents. Access to essential services such as education, healthcare, and clean water remains a challenge for many black residents in the Tsitsa Catchment (La Maitre *et al*., 2014). Infrastructure development in rural areas may be inadequate, resulting in disparities in service provision between urban and rural areas.

Fields in the area have been abandoned, reflecting the legacy of past policies that contributed to significant land degradation (La Maitre et al., 2014; van Tol et al., 2014). Under apartheid, restrictions on work and education compelled physically able community members, particularly men, to migrate in search of income to support elderly parents and children, leaving women to shoulder most household and agricultural responsibilities (Graham et al., 2018; Biggs et al., 2017). This out-migration, combined with the failure to transmit agricultural knowledge to the next generation, has led to widespread abandonment of cultivated lands, as returning men found their sons disinterested in farming (Itzkin et al., 2021; Waalewijn et al., 2019).

The effects of these past events continue to impact the area to this day; the majority of its population still inhabits the most underdeveloped areas, live in conditions of poverty, and very few have been educated under the formal education system of South Africa (Kakembo and Ndou, 2020).

The human landscape is made up of mostly commercial interests, with forestry and cereal cultivation in the west, and residential areas in the east. These communal areas are made up of isolated settlements, abandoned cultivated lands, freely moving livestock, dirt roads and attempts to control gully erosion, like patching with rocks. The social fabric is marked by a strong sense of community and customary leadership structures, which play a significant role in local governance and resource management (Noovoa *et al*., 2018).

Overall, the Tsitsa Catchment is a critical component of the Eastern Cape's natural landscape, providing valuable ecosystem services, water resources, and livelihoods for local communities. Effective management and conservation efforts are necessary to ensure its long-term sustainability and resilience in the face of environmental challenges and socio-economic pressures. Projects such as the TP aim to build social-ecological resilience by enhancing local capacities and fostering collaborative governance frameworks (Vetter, 2023).

These initiatives recognize the importance of community engagement in managing natural resources sustainably and improving socio-economic conditions in the catchment (van Tol *et al*., 2018).

1.2.2 The Tsitsa Project as a complex social-ecological system and a natural resources management initiative

The Mzimvubu Water Project (MWP), a large-scale dam-building project, was proposed with the intention of alleviating poverty in the region. The proposed dams were provisionally called the Ntabelanga and Lalini Dams, and were an integral part of the MWP, intended to irrigate a region near Tsolo and provide water to people as far away as Mthatha and supply hydroelectric electricity, jobs, and water.

The Tsitsa Project (TP) (previously Ntabelanga-Lalini Ecological Infrastructural Project (NLEIP)) was started due to concerns about the MWP's viability around erosion, land degradation, dam sedimentation, and financial viability (Cockburn *et al*., 2018). The land degradation in the basin is attributed to several interconnected issues, which include topography, geology, climate, poor landscape management, and weak governance. The landscape of the catchment is still being restored to sustain livelihoods, despite obstacles encountered throughout the dam construction process.

Owing to the deteriorating condition of important catchment areas, there is a possibility that the dams in the Tsitsa Catchment (~494 000 hectares) could fill with silt and sediment in a few decades. To reduce silting and sedimentation and to improve and protect the livelihoods of individuals who live in and around the watershed, the solution lies in deeply ingrained landscape restoration.

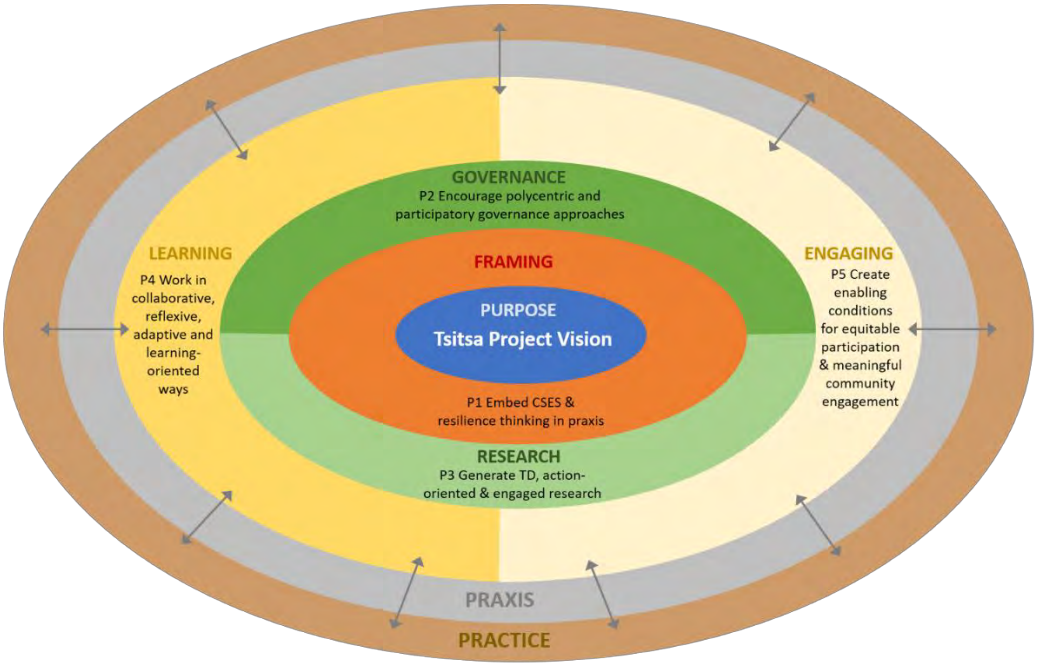
The Department of Environment, Fisheries and Forestry (DEFF), Rhodes University (RU), LIMA Rural Development Foundation (LIMA), the University of Fort Hare (UFH), and the University of the Free State (UFS) are partners in the multi-stakeholder TP. Although they do not have full partner status, the universities of Stellenbosch and Witwatersrand collaborate with student representatives. Although the above-mentioned are TP's key partners, a wide range of additional stakeholders are involved in the project, such as local catchment people, traditional authorities, organisations that carry out restoration efforts, municipalities, government agencies and partner universities. The TP had additional stakeholders in the form

of implementing agents who played the intermediary role between researchers and the Tsitsa community by turning participatory decisions into actionable outcomes.

The Tsitsa Project vision is**: "*To support sustainable livelihoods for local people through integrated landscape management that strives for resilient social-ecological systems and which fosters equity in access to ecosystem services*."** The vision provides a purpose of what the TP works towards, with numerous principles used to achieve the vision, which are discussed in the next section.

Guiding Principles of the Tsitsa Project (based on Cockburn et al., 2018)

In order to bridge the gap between research and practice in NRM and to foster better relationships between researchers and other relevant stakeholders for sustainable land and water management, the TP principles emphasize the use of CSES thinking to provide a shared mental model that promotes an integrated understanding of humans-in-nature (Principle 1). The principles also support polycentric and participatory governance (PG) approaches to manage complex place-based SES landscapes, which are supported by the social learning approach (Keen et al., 2005; Lotz-Sisitka *et al*., 2015; Reed et al., 2018) (Principle 2). The TP also recognises the multifaceted nature of CSESs, and therefore works in a transdisciplinary (TD) way that tries to co-produce knowledge through the integration of scientific and non-scientific knowledge into a whole rather than the sum of its parts (that is, the TP does more than bring different disciplines together, but tries to break the disciplinary boundaries by co-developing research questions and other sense-making mechanisms) (Principle 3) (Lang *et al*., 2012; Wolff *et al*., 2019). Disciplines work together in reflexive, adaptive, learning-focused (Bolton, 2009; Wood et al., 2015), and co-developed ways to support systemic knowledge and responses to non-linearity and uncertainty in CSESs (Principle 4). The principles further provide a supportive environment for stakeholders who are committed to meaningfully engaging with local communities to ensure fair participation (Principle 5). The principles as a whole support the ability of managers to identify and analyse shocks and disturbances inside the CSES, as well as legitimacy, monitoring, and compliance. It also fosters a deeper comprehension of system dynamics and raises a number of questions about power relations and involvement level, particularly in light of the surrounding circumstances.



Vision: **PURPOSE** – What we are working towards.
Layer 1: **FRAMING** – Principle 1: How we understand the system, how we think about the system, how we act in the system.
Layer 2: **RESEARCH & GOVERNANCE** – Principle 2 & Principle 3: What we are doing.
Layer 3: **LEARNING & ENGAGING** – Principle 4 & Principle 5: How we do what we do / how we work.
Layer 4: **PRAXIS** – Purposeful and reflexive two-way interface between theory and practice
Layer 5: **PRACTICE** – Sustainable management and governance of land and livelihoods in practice.

Figure 1.3: Conceptual presentation of five layered principles (P1-5) that guide the Tsitsa Project (CSES – complex social-ecological system; TD – transdisciplinary). The principles inform praxis that takes at the interface of theory and practice (Cockburn et al. 2018).

The first principle (P1 on the orange layer) states: Embed complex social-ecological systems and resilience thinking in praxis. It deals with the framing, in terms of how the system is understood, how the system is thought about, and how it is acted within the system. The second principle shown as P2 in the diagram in dark green reads: Encourage polycentric and participatory governance approaches, and is about what the project does. Principle 3 (light green, P3) states: Generate transdisciplinary, action-oriented and engaged research. Like Principle 1 above, this principle embodies what the TP team does. Principle 4: Work in collaborative, reflexive, adaptive and learning-oriented ways is about how the team works. Principle 5: Create enabling conditions for equitable participation and meaningful community engagement, also shows how the TP team does what it does.

It is important to note that these guiding principles make the ideas surrounding the TP's intention to be participatory in terms of trying to involve stakeholders at all levels is quite

evident. The use of concepts such as TD, polycentric and participatory governance, collaborative, social learning, community engagement, and equitable participation are all words and phrases that show the TP's participatory intentions. However, there was no particular definition of the intended participation that was agreed upon, which could have affected the experiences of the participants of the project in many interesting ways. These experiences form a crucial part of this research study, and will be vital in informing future applications of participatory land and water management initiatives.

Stakeholder Participation Timeline in the Tsitsa Project

The Tsitsa Project has evolved as a collaborative, transdisciplinary landscape restoration initiative operating within the Tsitsa River catchment in South Africa. A central feature of the project's design is its commitment to inclusive stakeholder participation, epistemic justice, and adaptive co-management. This section outlines the timeline of stakeholder engagement, highlighting when key actors—government, researchers, implementing agents, and local community members—formally joined the project, and how their roles evolved over time.

2013–2014: Project Inception and Government-Led Planning

The foundation for the Tsitsa Project was laid in 2013 when the South African Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA, now the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, DFFE) identified the Tsitsa catchment as a high-priority landscape for ecological restoration under the *Natural Resource Management (NRM)* programmes. During this period, stakeholder engagement was largely top-down, with DEA leading scoping efforts and inviting a small group of researchers from Rhodes University to provide scientific support (Palmer et al., 2018; Roux et al., 2020).

2015: Formal Establishment and Researcher Integration

The Tsitsa Project was formalised in 2015, marking the beginning of a more structured collaboration between government and academia. Researchers from Rhodes University, particularly from the Institute for Water Research (IWR) and the Environmental Learning Research Centre (ELRC), played a key role in shaping the project's adaptive and transdisciplinary approach (Clark et al., 2016; Palmer et al., 2018). This period focused on developing a shared vision, grounded in the principles of epistemic justice, co-learning, and stakeholder inclusivity.

2016–2017: Implementation Partnerships and Early Community Engagement

In late 2016 or early 2017, the LIMA Rural Development Foundation was contracted as the project's main implementation partner. LIMA's role was to support community-based interventions, focusing on livelihood enhancement, community mobilisation, and improved engagement between technical teams and local residents (Palmer et al., 2018). By 2017, the project initiated its first Communities of Practice (CoPs), namely the Sediment and Restoration (S&R) CoP, Governance CoP, and the Livelihoods and Ecosystem Services (L&ES) CoP. These CoPs provided platforms for collaborative learning and stakeholder dialogue across scales.

2018: Deepening Participation through Community Liaison Officers

A significant milestone in stakeholder engagement occurred in 2018 with the recruitment of Community Liaison Officers (CLOs), drawn from local communities within the catchment. The CLOs were appointed to enhance communication, foster trust, and serve as intermediaries between the project team and community stakeholders (Palmer et al., 2020; Tsitsa Project, 2021). Their inclusion marked a deliberate shift towards deeper local participation and the institutionalisation of epistemic justice principles. In the same year, new CoPs emerged to reflect expanding thematic interests, including the Grazing and Fire Management (G&FM) CoP, Knowledge Management (KM) CoP, and a cross-cutting Climate Change CoP.

2019–2021: Adaptive Co-Management and Stakeholder Integration

Between 2019 and 2021, the project matured into a multi-actor collaboration with strengthened feedback loops among local residents, CLOs, researchers, implementers, and government agencies. The PG&CV CoP took on a central role in exploring polycentric governance arrangements and supporting both internal coordination and external stakeholder integration. The use of participatory monitoring and evaluation tools, such as community mapping and community feedback sessions, helped surface diverse perspectives and challenge dominant narratives (Palmer et al., 2020; Biggs et al., 2021). Specific efforts were made to include women, youth, and other often-marginalised voices.

2022–2023: Institutionalisation and Legacy Planning

In the most recent phase of the project, participation structures have become increasingly institutionalised. The roles of CLOs and CoPs were consolidated, and knowledge-sharing

processes were refined to promote data accessibility, transparency, and legacy planning. Collaboration extended to neighbouring catchments and regional stakeholders, with an emphasis on aligning project outputs with broader policy frameworks and catchment-level planning (Tsitsa Project, 2022).

Summary of Tsitsa Project Communities of Practice (CoPs)

The Tsitsa Project had established a network of Communities of Practice (CoPs) to support integrated, adaptive catchment management through collaborative knowledge exchange, systems thinking, and stakeholder engagement. Initially focused on fostering trust and two-way knowledge flow between science and practice, the project created safe platforms—such as the Science-Management Forum and its associated meetings—for these communities to emerge and evolve.

Development and Structure of CoPs

The first CoP to form in 2016 was Sediment and Restoration (S&R)**,** followed by the Governance CoP and Livelihoods & Ecosystem Services (L&ES) CoPs in 2017. Over time, new CoPs emerged in response to evolving needs, including Grazing & Fire Management (G&FM)**,** Climate Change**,** Knowledge Management (KM)**,** and System Praxis. Originally informal working groups, these CoPs became voluntary, cross-linked teams focused on collaborative learning and action.

Each CoP contributes to the overall Tsitsa vision through its unique thematic focus, while supporting integration across the broader project landscape.

Vision Summaries of Individual CoPs

- **Sediment & Restoration CoP (S&R):**
  Works to reduce erosion and support land restoration using practices that are both socially relevant and ecologically sustainable, contributing to a resilient catchment system.
- **Participatory Governance & Community Voice CoP (PG&CV):**
  Promotes polycentric, inclusive governance models to support internal coordination and external engagement, with potential application in neighbouring catchments.

- **Livelihoods & Ecosystem Services CoP (L&ES):**

  Aims to improve local well-being using community-driven approaches that align with catchment-scale planning, guided by Tsitsa Project principles and strengthened institutions.
- **Grazing & Fire Management CoP (G&FM):**

  Seeks to develop a comprehensive understanding of grazing-fire dynamics within social-ecological systems, especially in erosion-prone communal areas.
- **Climate Change CoP:**

  Focuses on reducing vulnerability by raising awareness of future risks, supporting adaptive livelihoods, and integrating climate resilience into ecological restoration and catchment planning. Climate indicators are key to monitoring change.
- **System Praxis CoP:**

  Strengthens systems thinking and modelling within the project to improve understanding, integration, and collaboration. It supports strategic coherence rather than isolated modelling efforts.
- **Knowledge & Learning (KM) CoP:**

  Ensures that data, information, and knowledge are accessible, understandable, and usable by all stakeholders, enabling informed decision-making and cross-project collaboration.

Each Cop – undertook research in particular way. This research was part of the governance development CoP. My general contribution to the governance CoP is published in palmer et al 2022 (Anthropocene). The thesis took a perspective outside of, and overarching the CoPs. All the participants in all the CoP engagements were categorised into the four groups: list – residents, government officials, implementers and researchers and the question of the quality of the participatory experience was considered.

The TP finished before the thesis research, and the thesis research was not reintegrated into TP findings.

1.3 Thesis focus: participation

Effective participation is needed to move steadily towards the goal of developing participatory governance for increased ecological sustainability, and social justice and equity outcomes from NRM (Wolff *et al*., 2019). However, capacity and capabilities to ensure effective participation and develop participatory governance are weak (Gaventa, 2010). If

people are to be empowered to make decisions for themselves and to assess decisions made, participation development is crucial for participatory decision-making and self-determination in NRM processes (Dietz *et al*., 2003; Kosko, 2013; Reed, 2008).

While engagement processes are usually primarily organised to attain certain specified aims and objectives, it nevertheless remains important to understand stakeholders' expectations and to pay attention to those outcomes deemed beneficial in their eyes (Reed *et al.*, 2009; Gustafson and Hertting, 2017). Any group of people includes a range of backgrounds, and therefore different interests and values in relation to, for instance, the natural resources that are being taken care of (Moen, 2006). In planning and undertaking participatory processes, there is a pervasive tendency to homogenize communities and a failure to recognize the individual differences existing within them (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995; Li, 2017).

Participation needs to start making sense to those who participate, and it is important to clarify the meaning of participation in context, before using participatory approaches (Currie-Alder, 2003). While everyone is trying to work together towards achieving the goals of a project, the truth of the matter is that they all have a history that influences their perception of the world (Moen, 2006). Participation is personal and must be facilitated with care in order to include the different individuals who engage in it. People's ideas of participation differ, and sometimes even contradict one another.

Participation also has different impacts on those who are involved, such as new lessons or gaining confidence. If proper care is not taken to unpack these differences, then participation may remain just an ideal and not a reality (Cornwall, 2001; Cornwall, 2017). People who belong to marginalized groups frequently have the least control over the processes of change that affect their lives and struggle with both personal and systemic vulnerabilities (Koggel, 2019).

Even though participation is usually viewed as a "good thing", a major flaw of participation can be tokenism, where participation is superficial, serving more as a symbolic gesture rather than a meaningful engagement. Tokenism occurs when individuals or groups are included only to give the appearance of inclusiveness without genuinely considering their input or addressing their needs (Arnstein, 1969; Crawford *et al*., 2020; Monno and Khakee, 2012). This can lead to frustration and disillusionment among participants who feel their contributions are not valued (Fernández-Martínez, 2020; Wunderlich, 2020).

Despite efforts to promote inclusive participation, structural inequalities can prevent certain groups from participating fully (Bourke *et al*., 2021; Brodie *et al*., 2009). Factors such as socio-economic status, education, gender, race, culture and disability can create barriers to participation that can result in a lack of diverse perspectives and reinforce existing power imbalances (Young, 2002). For instance, marginalized communities may have less access to the resources and information needed to engage effectively. Participation in group settings may sometimes also leave individuals feeling pressured to conform to the majority view, where their desire for consensus and harmony overrides critical thinking and expression of unorthodox opinions (Mansbridge, 1990; Schwartz, 2017), leading to poor decisions that lack innovation and diversity.

Excessive demands for participation can lead to overload and burnout, particularly in workplace and community settings (Kirkpatrick, 2022). When individuals are required to engage in numerous participatory activities, it can detract from their primary responsibilities and lead to stress and fatigue. The need to accommodate multiple viewpoints can sometimes lead to participatory processes being time-consuming and inefficient, particularly when decisions need to be made quickly (Biaocchi and Ganuza, 2017; Bouw et al., 2023). Extensive discussions and debates can slow down decision-making processes, leading to delays and frustration (Fung, 2020). In some cases, the bureaucratic nature of participation can become so cumbersome that it discourages engagement rather than promoting it (Cornwall, 2008).

In addition, these concerns speak to the idea of power relations, and in particular, how some actors within the participatory space control the epistemic exchanges among the different stakeholders involved. Some of these power relations work to dismiss other ways of knowing based on some prejudice that the hearer (usually powerful) draws upon to undermine the credibility of the speaker (usually less powerful) (Davies, 2016). The concept of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) is important in this regard. Epistemic injustice is the idea that a person can be unfairly discriminated against in their capacity as a knower based on prejudices about them relating to their gender, social background, ethnicity, race, sexuality, accent, and many others (Fricker, 2007; Tsosie, 2012). The deliberate or unintentional case of a hearer undermining a speaker in their capacity as a knower is a case of epistemic injustice. The concept of epistemic injustice allows me to better understand the ways in which certain views

of the world hinder the ability of some groups to participate in knowledge production as epistemic agents.

This study aims to explore some of the power dynamics in the context of the Tsitsa Project (TP) and specifically in relation to the development of participatory governance capacity and capability. The TP offers an interesting context within which to explore these dynamics, given that researchers have engaged with stakeholders in the catchment on different scales, under the umbrella of "participatory research" and, in particular, because governance development research is designated in terms of "participatory governance".

1.4 Aim and Objectives

1.4.1 Aim

The aim of this research is to elicit and analyse narratives of participation from Tsitsa Project stakeholder-participants, to advance both the conceptual understanding and practice of participation, and participatory governance, with a focus on epistemic (in)justice.

1.4.2 Objectives

1. To collect narratives of what it means to participate from the perspective of Tsitsa Project stakeholder-participants.

2. To analyse participant narratives to explore the ways epistemic (in)justice influenced people's experience and meaning of participation.

3. To develop a set of practical principles to guide meaningful participation.

1.5 Brief overview of following chapters

Chapter 2 presents the conceptual framing of the study, which describes the concept of participation as a central feature of good governance across the discourse of participatory governance and sustainable development. Epistemic justice is explored as the benchmark for assessing ethical, beneficial and effective participation in natural resources management. Critical realism provides a philosophical lens, consistent with the understanding of the Tsitsa River catchment as a CSES, and narratives are explored for their ability to forefront the threads of epistemic justice or injustice by highlighting the experiences of individual participants and engaging with what participation means to them.

Chapter 3 describes the overarching methodology and consequent methods. That is, the Tsitsa Project as a case study, and narrative interviews as the method of data collection, with poetic inquiry as a method of analysis, suitable both in a CSES context, and for its accessibility to the diverse participants involved.

Chapter 4 presents the findings in the form of found poems created out of the narrative interviews that were conducted, with brief interpretations of the poems. Each subsection of the chapter includes a description of the themes that came out of the poems presented. The chapter ends with a comparison and description of the common themes that cut across the four different sections.

Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the findings, using the concept of epistemic justice, and the philosophical stance of critical realism to examine ethical and beneficial participation. The chapter ends with conclusions and recommendations from the study.

CHAPTER 2: FRAMING PARTICIPATION

Building on the understanding of the research purpose and context developed in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 explores the intellectual, literature-based framing of this thesis.

Framing refers to how I choose to make sense of the world based on my experiences over time (Bryant, Thompson and Finklea, 2013; Van de Pas, 2014). As introduced, my theoretical and conceptual framing is that bio-physical landscapes and the people who live there are complex social-ecological systems (CSESs), with complexity providing the ontological basis of structure and function. This framing draws my research into the transdisciplinary domain where the broadest range of knowledges and knowers are included respectfully, with due attention to epistemic justice, and research seeks to catalyse change towards social-ecological justice (Wolff *et al*., 2018). With a focus on the problems faced by people in rural South African catchments, this framing draws the research into the need for transformation towards further developing the practice of participatory governance. That leads to the heart of the thesis: the nature and meaning of participation.

My interest here lies in the experiences of participation from the perspectives of the stakeholders who engage in a process where there are so many different interests to consider, and such a wide range of unspoken relations of power, with challenges arising out of whose knowledge counts when the power dynamics are at play (Davies, 2016; Fabinyi, 2014). In this regard, the concept of epistemic justice helps me to explore how different actors experience feeling respected (or disrespected) as knowledge producers in the participation space. Another useful dimension of epistemic justice for this study focuses on whether participants have the vocabulary and the conceptual overlap to speak and be heard, listen and understand. I hope to show that excluding diverse knowledge types is harmful in the knowledge production space pertaining to managing CSESs (Hunter and Richmond, 2022).

By treating participation as situated practice (Cornwall, 2001; 2011), I hope to develop thick accounts (Geertz, 1973) of causation, structures, and processes, which do justice to the complexity and heterogeneity of the social world (Bhaskar, 1975; Lu, 2019) that is embedded in the natural system. Further, I hope to have transitioned into clarity with poems of piercing thinness (that is, poems that are short, minimalistic, but profoundly impactful).

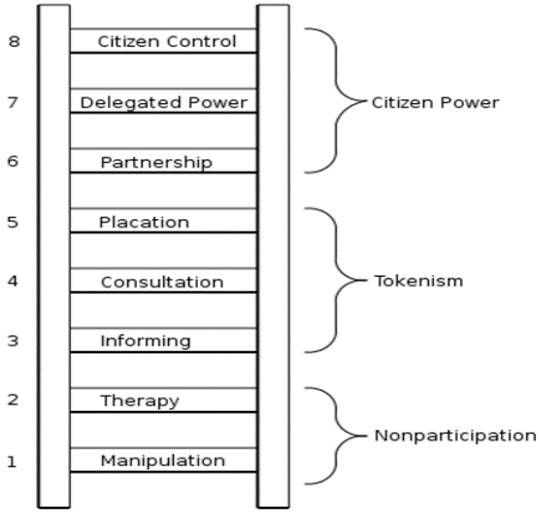
2.1 A summarised synthesis of the literature on participation

There is a large literature that defines (e.g. Oakley,1991), develops rationales (e.g. Buuren *et al*., 2019; Uittenbroek *et al*., 2019) and typologies of participation (e.g. Arnstein 1969; Pretty, 1995; White, 1996), and that also criticises the idea of participation (e.g. Cooke and Kothari, 2001). An early and influential paper describes the 'ladder of participation' (Arnstein, 1969) (Text Box 2.1), and much of the subsequent literature draws from this paper. Arnstein (1969) views participation as a continuum starting from the manipulation of participants at the lowest rung, to participant control at the top (the most desirable state of events). Some criticisms have been raised; for example, the simplistic representation of the ladder does not necessarily show the complexity and non-linearity in terms of the transitions between the rungs.

Another criticism of the ladder of participation is that the simplistic representation does not necessarily speak to the different contextual factors that influence participation. This study aims to contribute to filling these gaps in 'ladder' thinking, by treating participation as a situated practice (Cornwall, 2001), and exploring the specifics of individuals' experiences of participation. Hearing the different experiences might show the complex and sometimes completely opposite ways in which participants experience participation at the different stages of the ladder, as opposed to how that particular stage is described in terms of the ladder.

My goal is not necessarily to criticise Arnstein as she has already accounted for some of the fluctuations that occur in reality, where the process is not necessarily linear from manipulation to citizen control; rather, I am emphasising her recognition of the limited representation offered by the ladder metaphor, as compared to reality.

Text box 1. Arnstein's ladder of participation as one of the oldest and most cited typologies.



Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation is based on the redistribution of power, from citizens having little power over decisions, to citizens taking control of the decision-making process (Cornwall, 2017). The ladder metaphor helps to develop an understanding of the different ways in which government institutions apply the concept of participation, highlights the power relations that exist between the powerful and less powerful, and highlights the ways transactions of power differ across different stages of a participatory process. Even though groups are made to sound as if they are homogenous, Arnstein (1969) raises our awareness of the fact that within each group exist power differentials among the individuals ('the powerful' and 'the less powerful').

Arnstein (1969) groups the rungs into three categories or levels along a continuum starting with non-participation at the bottom, tokenism in the middle, and citizen power at the top (see the diagram above). Non-participation is made up of manipulation and therapy (citizens are engaged in participatory programmes where attempts are made to convince them that they are the problem, and so the focus of the 'participatory' programme is on curing them of their pathology), where the powerful hold all the decision-making power and only use the less powerful for numbers and acceptance of decisions that have already been made. Tokenism, comprising information, consultation and placation, takes place when the powerful allow the less powerful to make contributions as a symbol of inclusion, but these contributions do not amount to having any real influence on the process. Citizen

control forms the highest level where citizens have gained the ability to effectively confer with the powerful, at a level where they can influence decisions.

Since Arnstein (1969), the literature on participation has diversified. I use the broad distinctions between instrumental participation, which forefronts constraints (and at its most extreme is oppressive (Baskhar 1994)), and emancipatory participation, which forefronts a sense of freedom (Spies, 2020; Wals *et al*., 2008). In natural resources management (NRM), the definitions of participation differ, based on these approaches. Instrumental participation means to achieve specific resource management goals and outcomes, with stakeholders often engaged to meet pre-defined objectives. In contrast, emancipatory participation is a tool for social justice, empowerment, and addressing historical inequalities by giving marginalised groups a meaningful say in resource management decisions, with the goal of transforming power structures and promoting equity. Using these two modes of participation (Table 2.1) I further consider the dimensions of: i) who participates (considering whether participation is inclusive and broad, or exclusive and narrow); ii) why participation is undertaken (for example, is it to empower those who are often excluded? Or is it to just inform, rather than consult?); and iii) how it is undertaken (for example, at a shallow 'tick box' level or a deeper level that could lead to transformative change?).

This chapter delves into how these differences have been discussed through different definitions, rationales and typologies of participation. I use who participates, why participation is undertaken, or how participation is undertaken to provide a place to talk about these different approaches to participation. Firstly, I discuss the instrumental approach as the more potentially unfavourable approach in the context of complex social-ecological systems (CSESs), and then move to the emancipatory approaches that are more consistent with CSESs.

Table 2.1: An illustration of the emancipatory and instrumental approaches to participation as synthesised from the different definitions, typologies and rationales of participation in the literature

	Emancipatory approaches to participation	**Instrumental approaches to participation**

Who	There is a broad diversity of stakeholders, including the marginalised and less powerful (Wals *et al*., 2008). External parties play the role of facilitator/coach, with more transparency, while local people are engaged in conversations about their perceived needs and desired changes (Wals *et al*., 2008)	External parties play an expert role and determine indicators to be used for measurement, while citizens are just passive receivers and sources of information for the external evaluator (Wals *et al*., 2008) Only 'relevant' stakeholders are included (Musch and Streit, 2020)
Why	Emancipatory reasons for participation include a normative rationale where participation is a right (Buuren *et al*., 2019; Much and Streit, 2019), and a transformative rationale where participation enables empowerment (White, 1996).	Reasons for participation are defined by an instrumental rationale (Buuren *et al*., 2019; Much and Streit, 2019), with nominal participation (White, 1996) and a focus on legitimation and acceptance of pre-determined results.
	There are also rationales which can be either emancipatory or instrumental depending on how they are used: 1. a substantive rationale (Buuren *et al*., 2019; Much and Streit, 2019) where the goal of participation is effectiveness, and both academic and non-academic knowledge is used to develop innovative solutions; and 2. a pragmatic rationale where the involvement of many people is presumed to lead to better quality insights into problems (Thomas, 1993; Beierle, 2002).	
How	Emancipatory participation is deep (Brodie *et al*., 2009), and characterised by citizen power	Instrumental participation can be: absent (non-participation, Arnstein, 1969) or shallow

	(Arnstein, 1969), self-mobilisation (Pretty, 1995), and empowerment (International Association on Public Participation); Kamruzzaman and White, 2017; Cincera *et al*., 2019).	(simply to inform, ostensibly consult or placate in a tokenistic manner (International Association on Public Participation, Arnstein, 1969)). In all instances participation is influenced by a few powerful stakeholders.

2.1.1 The instrumental approach to participation

Generally, the instrumental approach is when participation is undertaken to achieve a specific purpose (Wals *et al*., 2008). In this way, participation is used as a means to an end (Granlund, 2013; Oakley, 1991). It (the instrumental approach) involves engaging stakeholders to achieve specific resource management objectives, such as conserving biodiversity, maximising resource extraction, or meeting regulatory requirements. The primary focus is on achieving tangible and predefined outcomes, often driven by government agencies, corporations, and resource managers. Stakeholder involvement is geared towards serving these objectives.

Who participates?

Instrumental approaches may be organized to include stakeholders with certain expertise who are equipped with enough knowledge and skill to express themselves (Much and Streit, 2020). The organisers are therefore more concerned about achieving the specific purpose for which participation was undertaken, which means potentially excluding certain marginalised voices that may not be recognised through mainstream definitions of experts, such as people from marginalised communities who may possess experiential knowledge. In this way, the empowerment and transformative aspects of participation do not take centre stage, only the easy functionality of bringing those certain voices in (Spies, 2020). External parties play an expert role and may determine indicators to be used for measurement, while local people are just passive receivers and sources of information for the external evaluator (Wals, *et al*., 2008)

So, those who participate are usually a limited number of experts who the organisers believe will help to achieve the specific goal for which the participatory process is undertaken. They

might include individuals, groups, or organisations that have a vested interest or expertise in the issue at hand. Participants may include token representatives of more marginalised groups who are purposively enabled to contribute and empowered to be influential.

Why participation is undertaken

In terms of the instrumental approaches, the rationale for participation varies from placing focus on the end goal and/or emphasising effectiveness, both of which can lead to participation that is more oppressive, or can be more emancipatory, depending on how well and sensitively the participation process is facilitated (Arieli *et al*., 2009; Mason and Niewonly, 2022). The instrumental rationale is a strongly functional application of participation to provide acceptance, legitimacy, and support for decisions made, because these decisions are co-produced and agreed on – at least in the presence of, if not by many people (Glucker *et al*., 2013; Musch and Streit, 2020). This aspect of participation may sometimes be perceived negatively in terms of retaining the *status quo* when the powerful use the less powerful to get their way (Buuren *et al*., 2019). It is often employed when input or cooperation from stakeholders is needed to reach technically-driven goals, like passing legislation or obtaining funding (Spies, 2020).

The substantive rationale (which focuses on effectiveness) places emphasis on the pragmatic aspects of participation by drawing from different knowledge types, particularly scientific and experiential knowledge, to improve the quality of information gathered about the system (Buuren *et al*., 2019; Musch and Streit, 2020). Enabling the presence and influence of diverse voices also means that more innovative and relevant solutions can emerge from the participatory process (Beierle, 2002; Glucker *et al*., 2013; Thomas, 1993; Uittenbroek *et al*., 2019; Wong, 2018). In this way, the substantive rationale is a combination of instrumental and emancipatory approaches. The inclusion of diverse knowledge types could be emancipatory if well executed, but when a strong emphasis on generating results and getting to a consensus overrides attention to balancing the different voices (Mansbridge, 1990; Schwartz, 2017), it may risk being instrumental and even perpetuate the exclusion of more marginalised voices, becoming oppressive (Mason and Niewonly, 2022; Musch and Streit, 2020).

White's typology draws attention to the different forms and functions of participation and the interests of those who initiate (top-down) and those invited (bottom-up) (White, 1996).

Under her (White's) typology, nominal participation and instrumental participation on the far end of the scale are closer to being oppressive, and representative participation aligns with the instrumental approach.

While the instrumental approach may, in some cases, be perceived negatively, especially by those who believe in the emancipatory school of thought, it may be helpful in cases where there are not enough resources like time and money to invest in a long deliberative process (Buuren, Meerkerk, and Tortajada, 2019). It is also well suited in cases where the primary focus is on technical or regulatory aspects, and when existing power structures and hierarchies are not of primary concern, and stakeholders are comfortable with top-down decision-making processes. The question that remains then, is how participation takes place under the instrumental approach.

How participation is undertaken

The level of stakeholder involvement can vary. Many fall into Arnstein's (1969) category of non-participation, where participants are either manipulated into accepting decisions that do not necessarily reflect their input, or made to believe they are the problem and they need help. Involvement can range from absent participation where participants are manipulated into becoming members of participatory structures like advisory boards, with the purpose of being educated instead of making any input; to shallow participation, where stakeholders have limited input and influence, made up of informing and consultation, to where some have a substantial say in decisions made through involvement, collaboration and partnership (Arnstein, 1969; International Association for Public Participation [IAP2], 2007). In other words, some stakeholders may be deeply engaged, while others might have a more passive role, offering token support or involvement to meet strategic objectives. In general, the depth of involvement depends on the organiser's needs and the stakeholders' importance to achieving the desired outcomes. The shallow engagement of some stakeholders through instrumental approaches may limit the participatory process to the tokenistic form that neither empowers nor leads to much transformation (Spies, 2020).

Instrumental approaches, when not carefully implemented or monitored can potentially lead to oppression or exacerbate existing power imbalances in several ways, including further marginalisation of the marginalised groups; tokenistic or limited influence; reinforcement of power hierarchies; ignoring local knowledge, which could lead to poor decision-making and

cultural insensitivity; selective inclusion that perpetuates the silencing of the marginalised voices, and focusing on short-term goals over long-term sustainability or broader social impacts (Spies, 2020; Wals *et al*., 2008).

In summary, an instrumental approach to participation involves stakeholders in a way that strategically aligns with specific objectives, and the depth of their involvement can vary, based on the desired outcomes. The critics of the instrumental approach argue that engaging people with pre-determined goals has more to do with manipulation than empowerment and transformation (Wals *et al*., 2008). To mitigate the potential negative consequences, it is crucial to carefully design and implement instrumental participation processes by ensuring transparency, accountability, and other mechanisms to encourage genuine stakeholder input (Much and Streit, 2020). Given the shortfalls of the instrumental approaches, many authors suggest a move towards more emancipatory or empowerment approaches in the natural resource management sphere is needed (Spies, 2020).

2.1.2 Emancipatory approaches to participation

Emancipatory approaches to participation are distinguished by their explicit focus on empowerment, social justice, and transformative change (Ferreya, 2006). Unlike instrumental approaches, which often treat participation as a means to secure efficiency, legitimacy, or compliance, emancipatory participation is concerned with participation as an end in itself, privileging process over predetermined outcomes (Parfitt, 2004; King, 2013; Narksompong & Limjirakan, 2015). While reflexivity—particularly among privileged researchers regarding their positionality—is a necessary dimension (Ferreya, 2006), it is insufficient on its own.

What makes an approach emancipatory is the coupling of reflexive practice with structural and procedural shifts that redistribute power and enable marginalised actors to exercise meaningful agency (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Cornwall, 2008). For example, participatory budgeting initiatives devolve decision-making authority directly to citizens, allowing them to set priorities for public spending (Wampler & Hartz-Karp, 2012), while the CAMPFIRE programme in Zimbabwe reallocated wildlife management rights and revenues to local communities, thereby altering entrenched power relations (Balint & Mashinya, 2006). In this

way, emancipatory approaches move beyond inclusion and consultation to institutionalise practices of co-decision and co-production, creating the conditions for historically marginalised voices not only to be heard but also to shape outcomes.

Who participates?

Emancipatory approaches aim to address systemic inequalities and power imbalances by allowing marginalised and minority groups to actively participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives (Mason and Niewonly, 2022). The emphasis is on involving those who have historically been excluded or oppressed, such as minority communities, disadvantaged populations, or marginalised individuals to engage meaningfully in decision-making processes that affect their lives (Wals *et al*., 2008). For instance, the premise for approaches such as community-based natural resources management (CBNRM) is to allow local communities to be empowered to utilise their surrounding natural resources for socio-economic growth (Spies, 2020). The emancipatory approaches have an explicit social justice and transformative agenda (Ferreya, 2006).

Why participation is undertaken

Emancipatory participation is undertaken to address social inequalities, empower marginalised groups, and challenge oppressive systems. It seeks to create a more equitable and just society by giving voice and agency to those who have been historically marginalised. For instance, the normative rationale for participation is the one mostly related to the emancipatory approach, and deals with the democratic deficit that was evident in the decision-making processes of traditional management styles (Bexell *et al*., 2010). Democratic deficit here refers to the deliberate exclusion of some people by preventing them from exercising their right to voice their opinions on certain matters (Birnbaum, 2016). The objective of the normative rationale is to give citizens, especially those who are likely to be affected by a development initiative, the opportunity to exercise their democratic right to have a say, be represented in, and exert some influence over the decision-making process since they are most likely going to deal with the long-term consequences of such decisions (Buuren, Meerkerk and Tortajada, 2019).

The normative rationale is emancipatory in that it is also about empowering those from marginalised social groups with the necessary skills to be able to express their interests and understand their part in determining their futures in relation to the decisions made; making them understand that they have a contribution to make, instead of the traditional way of accepting what the organising or facilitating entity proposes without much comment (Koggel, 2019). If done successfully, the normative rationale aims to bring people to a consensus by transforming some of their perspectives through their interaction with and exposure to different perspectives brought by other stakeholders into the space (Musch and Streit, 2020; Wals *et al*., 2008; White, 1996).

How participation is undertaken

In emancipatory approaches, stakeholders are deeply involved in decision-making processes. They are not just consulted or informed; they actively participate in shaping decisions, policies, and actions. Their perspectives and experiences are valued and integrated into the processes, with the goal of achieving transformative change. The focus is on long-term empowerment and structural change, making it a deep form of participation (Spies, 2020). The emancipatory approach is better aligned with Arnstein (1969)'s citizen control, Pretty's self-mobilisation, and the International Association on Public Participation's (2007) empowerment, where people take initiative independently of external help to tackle common interests and needs (Kamruzzaman and White, 2017).

Emancipatory participation goes beyond instrumental goals and aims to empower communities and individuals to take control of their own destinies. It often involves capacity-building, education, and a long-term commitment to addressing systemic injustices (Wals *et al*., 2008). However, some critics of the emancipatory approach pose the issue of the time and resources required to build a proper culture of participation and transformative change (Spies, 2020; Wals *et al*., 2008). Kamruzzaman and White (2017) also warn that empowerment in development discourse tends to focus on the same people to represent their communities in different initiatives, which may isolate them from the communities whom they are meant to represent, or side-line others since it might end up being easier to work with already empowered people. Time and resource issues led Palmer *et al*. (2018) to term deeply engaged participation as "tortoise work".

2.1.3 Application of instrumental and emancipatory approaches to participation in the context of complex social-ecological systems

In terms of their application in the CSES context, the emancipatory approaches have the greatest advantage owing to their flexibility and their ability to "adapt as you go" since the focus is on the process of participation itself, in addition to what can be achieved (Spies, 2020; Sterling et al., 2019; Wals *et al*., 2008). Participation as a means (instrumental approaches) can be frustrating and disappointing if things do not go as planned, which is usually the case with participatory processes, especially in the case of CSES and the uncertainties within them (Musch and Streit, 2020). Musch and Streit (2020) raise an additional challenge when the goal for applying participation is effectiveness, where funding calls encourage transdisciplinarity, yet assessments are based on immediate outputs, showing a lack of careful consideration of the limited time and resources available for deliberation.

In general, the choice between instrumental and emancipatory approaches may not always be clear-cut. The key is to align your approach with your goals, stakeholders, and ethical considerations, while remaining flexible and responsive to the context (Wals *et al*., 2008). It is also important to consider the broader social, environmental, and ethical implications of decisions. Hybrid approaches that combine elements of both may often be most effective, depending on the complexity and nuances of the situation (Hassenforder *et al*., 2018). Combining instrumental and emancipatory elements in participation efforts can help balance the focus on specific outcomes with the goal of promoting social justice and equity (Spies, 2020). It is, however, vitally important to avoid oppressive participatory engagement.

2.2 Roles of power and epistemic (in)justice in participation

Power dynamics and epistemic injustice play significant roles in shaping the differences between instrumental and emancipatory approaches to participation in various contexts, including NRM and decision-making processes.

Power dynamics (dealt with in greater depth under 2.2.1): In instrumental approaches, power is often concentrated in the hands of authorities, government agencies, or corporations. These entities have the authority to define goals, set agendas, and determine the extent of stakeholder involvement (Buuren *et al*., 2019). This can lead to power imbalances where marginalised groups have limited influence (Fernández-Martínez, 2020).

The emancipatory approach seeks to challenge and transform power dynamics. It aims to decentralise power and give marginalised groups a meaningful role in decision-making (Spies, 2020). This can involve redistributing authority and control over resources and policies to empower marginalised stakeholders (Arnstein, 1969; Wallerstein *et al*., 2019).

Epistemic injustice (dealt with in greater depth under 2.2.1): Epistemic injustice refers to the unjust treatment of someone based on their knowledge, expertise or way of knowing (Fricker, 2007). In instrumental participation, epistemic injustice can occur when the knowledge, experiences, and perspectives of marginalised or local communities are undervalued or dismissed. Their insights may be seen as less credible than those of experts, reinforcing existing power imbalances. Emancipatory participation recognises the importance of diverse knowledge systems and experiences. Under the emancipatory approach, epistemic injustice is actively addressed by valuing and incorporating the local knowledge, wisdom, and perspectives of marginalised communities. This approach acknowledges that different ways of knowing are equally valid and valuable in decision-making processes.

2.2.1. Power dynamics in participatory spaces

Power dynamics in NRM participatory spaces can be complex and significant (Cullen *et al*., 2014). These dynamics often involve various stakeholders, including government agencies, local communities, non-governmental organizations, and private corporations. Power dynamics among participants play a significant role in determining who the decision-making process favours (Fabinyi *et al*., 2014); where the powerful usually get what they want as opposed to the less powerful. According to Hopkins (2010), it is not practical to eradicate power differentials within the participatory space since they can be either intentional or unintentional, and sometimes either unidentified or reinforced by mediators (Gaventa, 2006).

When power is distributed fairly, accompanied by genuine, open communication, inviting one another to participate in conversations, and engaging the help of the powerful to promote fearless learning, constructive power dynamics arise (Looman *et al*., 2022). Constructive power dynamics can be encouraged through the recognition of some implicit belief systems within the participatory space, making them explicit so that it opens communication and learning among people from different cultural and professional backgrounds (Brouwer *et al*., 2016).

Recent scholarship demonstrates how social learning enhances resilience, inclusion, and collective action (Reed et al., 2018). Social learning refers to a process where diverse actors—community members, scientists, practitioners, policy-makers—interact, reflect, and co-create new knowledge, shifting not just individual behaviours but collective worldviews and institutions (Ernst, 2019). It often involves iterative cycles of action and reflection, facilitating learning that can generate transformative systemic change (Keen et al., 2005). Social learning empowers the people involved, especially those marginalised voices who are newly entering decision-making spaces through participatory governance.

Strengthening the capacity of marginalized groups to participate effectively in decision-making can help mitigate power imbalances (Samarzija and Cerovac, 2021). Addressing power dynamics in NRM participatory spaces typically involves promoting inclusivity, transparency, and equity as is the goal with emancipatory approaches (Lockwood *et al*., 2010). It may also require changes in policy and governance structures to ensure that all stakeholders have a meaningful voice in the management of natural resources (Spies, 2020).

Different typologies have been used to show the relationship between participation and empowerment (Kamruzzaman and White, 2017). What is most similar among the typologies is the idea of where most power resides per stage, where citizen control in Arnstein's ladder and self-mobilization in Pretty's (1995) typologies are the most emancipatory levels, while informing and consultation are representative of more instrumental approaches.

Kosko (2013) suggests the consideration of when people enter the participatory space, as the time of entry affects how much self-determination they get to enjoy in practice. Many countries have come up with brilliant frameworks to recognise that people should have greater control over the decisions that affect their lives; however, given that the practices towards self-determination are surrounded by numerous contextual factors, Kosko (2013) recommends that attention be paid to the process aspect of participation, to understand whether the choices made came out of a manipulative or tokenistic process, or whether people had enough information to fully express their agency. Under the instrumental approaches, indigenous people are mostly victims of agency vulnerability, which is the situation where minorities are not presented with much advantage to protect themselves against unwanted change or effecting the changes they desire (Koggel, 2019; Kosko, 2013).

According to Gaventa (2006) and Cullen and others (2014), the power dynamics that can influence an engagement space depend on the type of space in which participation occurs (a closed [few actors making decisions], invited [open to more stakeholders] or claimed/created space [created by the less powerful to address common concerns]); the level at which it takes place (on a local, national, or global scale); and the form it takes (whether it involves visible, hidden or invisible power).

Relating the types of spaces in which participation happens to instrumental and emancipatory approaches

Closed spaces are more closely related to instrumental approaches as only a few stakeholders or representatives are charged with making decisions without consulting the broader public (Gaventa, 2006). This means that decision-making power remains concentrated in the hands of a few stakeholders who are believed to have expertise on the topic of interest.

Invited spaces can be a combination of the two approaches, where the power holders who invite others can either hold on to decision-making power, making the process more instrumental, or relinquish decision-making powers to those invited, tending towards more emancipatory approaches (Hassenforder *et al.*, 2018). An invited space is also likely to be a step towards meaningful participation since stakeholders are actively engaged in dialogue, and may sometimes even influence decisions to varying degrees (Buuren *et al*., 2019; Spies, 2020).

A claimed/created space relates more to emancipatory approaches since autonomy over decisions lies in the hands of the less powerful in the quest to address those common issues that they have identified (Buuren *et al*., 2019). Claimed spaces relate to self-mobilization/citizen control in different typologies of participation, which align more closely with emancipatory approaches involving deeper and meaningful participation, where stakeholders have a significant say in the decision-making process. This kind of space has the potential to lead to transformative change, and citizens have increased control over their lives (Spies, 2020).

Tokenism

These power dynamics sometimes lead to one group imposing their interests upon other groups and denying the less powerful the chance to express their epistemic agency. If not

paid attention to, these power relations may lead to tokenism (Wamba, 2017). Tokenism is the practice or act of doing something as a symbol of following rules, or what is expected of one, when the person doing it does not believe it is necessary (Arboleda, 2014; Yilmaz and Dalkilik, 2019). In other words, people invite others under the pretence that they seek their opinion, while in essence, the aim for engaging with them is just to tick boxes that people were present. This is a critical issue to consider when looking at different experiences of participation. Fair and inclusive descriptions of participation and discussion are necessary to recognize the consequences of power dynamics (Koggel, 2019; Kosko, 2013).

Tokenistic participation is primarily instrumental in nature. It involves surface-level involvement where stakeholders are consulted or informed, but their input has little genuine influence on decisions (Spies, 2020). Tokenistic participation often serves the purpose of meeting requirements or giving the appearance of involvement without substantial impact. Generally, closed participatory spaces and to some extent, invited spaces can be associated with tokenism and instrumental approaches, especially if more focus is placed on cost-effectiveness than empowerment (Kamruzzaman, 2020). Claimed/created spaces align with emancipatory approaches and seek to empower marginalised groups, giving them control over decisions that affect their lives, while promoting social justice and transformative change.

Sometimes the more participatory we strive for processes to be, the more some of the power imbalances at play are concealed, including the power exercised by the more powerful to invite the less powerful to participate in the first place (Chilvers, 2009; Wamba, 2017). When power imbalances are not confronted, they can easily translate into tokenism as those invited then tend to withhold opinions that could threaten those in charge (Wamba, 2017). Recognising the power dynamics at play within a participatory space is an important starting point for making participatory NRM effective, especially in places where people have been previously excluded from such spaces (Choles *et al*., 2014; Pollard and Du Toit, 2008). Power dynamics can play a role in determining sustainable engagement.

Emancipatory approaches emphasise empowerment, social justice and the transformation of power dynamics (Spies, 2020). They seek to address systemic inequalities and empower historically marginalised groups.

In general, participation in CSESs is about promoting the different epistemic views required to achieve a greater understanding of the system. However, the power imbalances that are inherent in participatory spaces can lead to the dismissal of certain kinds of knowledges (Fabinyi, 2014), expressive of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), which I turn to below.

2.2.2 Participation and Epistemic in/justice

Participation in decision-making processes can intersect with the concepts of epistemic injustice and justice, particularly in contexts where diverse voices and knowledges are involved (Assche, Beunen, and Duineveld, 2017). Epistemic injustice is concerned with how knowledge is related to power, oppression, and various types of discrimination (Collins, 2017), and suggests that the powerful are likely to have an epistemic advantage over other voices; expressed, for example, in the silencing of other voices or in the fact that some voices are more easily believed than others (Fricker, 2007). Epistemic injustice relates to being treated unfairly in relation to knowing. These issues include a wide range of topics concerning wrongful treatment and unjust structures in meaning-making and knowledge-producing practices, such as the following: exclusion and silencing; invisibility and inaudibility (or distorted presence or representation); having one's meanings or contributions systematically distorted, misheard, or misrepresented; having diminished status or standing in communicative practices; unfair differentials in authority and/or epistemic agency; being unfairly distrusted; receiving no or minimal acknowledgement; being co-opted or instrumentalised; and being marginalized as a result of dysfunctional dynamics.

The ideas pertaining to epistemic injustice are not new *per se*, but the concept became popularly known through the work of English philosopher, Miranda Fricker (2007), and refer to the act of undermining someone in their capacity as a knowledge bearer or producer (Weyer *et al*., 2019). Fricker (2007) identifies two forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Particularly important for my purposes, drawing from the theory of epistemic (in)justice helps me to explore some of the factors that people use to determine the credibility of knowledge contributions (Tsosie, 2012) in a participatory space. Epistemic injustice helped me to determine how power dynamics influenced the recognition of diverse knowledge systems required in the management of natural resources. It further enabled me to explore what epistemic injustices hinder inclusive participation and what epistemic justices enabled it.

2.2.3 The problem of epistemic injustice

Testimonial injustice

As the name suggests, testimonial injustice refers to a situation when a person's testimony is wrongfully dismissed or discredited because of a prejudice held by a listener. Even though the concept of testimony is commonly thought to refer to statements given in court, philosophically speaking, testimony can refer to any exchange of information (Glass and Newman, 2015). People constantly express their epistemic agency, by for instance sharing information or 'testimonies', whether with family, friends, colleagues, or others (Davies, 2016; Fricker, 2003). This information-sharing turns into an injustice when someone's testimony is unfairly judged by the person listening to it because of a prejudice against the identity of the speaker. The identities that usually fall prey to this form of discrimination are of people who belong to the minoritised and marginalised groups based on their gender, age, race, religion, sexual orientation, political affiliations, economic status, education level, and many more (Anderson, 2012; Tsosie, 2012).

In any kind of information exchange, the credibility of a speaker's testimony is judged based on whether the listener believes the speaker using their own evaluation measures (Hargie, 2021). However, this often means that testimony is seen as credible mainly when the listener has a reason to believe that the testimony is true (Grasswick, 2017). The decision to believe or not to believe testimony can be made by the individual with whom we share this information, based on any personal bias they may have, not because what you shared was incorrect or unrealistic (Andress and Purtill, 2020); for instance, if a marginalized community's knowledge about local environmental issues is disregarded in a decision-making process (Patin *et al*., 2021). To support this example, Baker and Constant, (2020) speak about the tendency of trained scientists to dismiss local ecological knowledge until they can measure the credibility of this experiential knowledge against existing theories before they believe local people. The scientists in this case hold a bias based on the idea that some of the members of the local community who present such knowledge lack the educational background to make certain claims, and will only believe them if what they are saying has been proven or suggested by other scientists who are perceived as 'more credible' knowers than the local people.

Furthermore, the idea that certain knowledge forms cannot be trusted, can silence those who belong to the groups whose knowledge is continuously not given credibility (Medina, 2011). For example, when women's input is routinely rejected by male colleagues due to prejudice, it is called testimonial quieting (Dotson, 2011). On the other hand, the silencing also takes the form of the same women deciding to limit their contribution because it will be dismissed anyway, resulting in testimonial smothering (Warman, 2021). Testimonial smothering refers to a situation where someone who has experienced constant dismissal of their contribution, decides to stop making any more inputs.

Anderson (2012) further points to how epistemic injustice may arise out of 'normally just' situations such as, access to markers of credibility, ethnocentrism, and shared reality bias. These structural epistemic injustices basically speak to the idea of the human mind being stereotyped to favour particular people in a given context. The three examples of structural causes of group-based credibility deficit mentioned above are not unjust at face value, but as will be explained in the paragraphs that follow, they turn into injustice under certain circumstances.

Access to markers of credibility refers to a situation where it is justifiable to deny an unqualified candidate a job; however, if the person belongs to a marginalised group that systematically does not have equal access to education, then it may be viewed as an injustice. So, the issue here is not necessarily that the person hiring holds prejudice against the unqualified person, but the system within the context where they are operating has placed the unqualified person at a disadvantage by denying them access to education as a marker of credibility in this situation.

Ethnocentrism refers to how people tend to give more credibility to people who belong to their group, no matter how long they have known each other; the moment they are labelled as members of group A in a workshop for instance, they tend to believe each other more easily (Keith, 2019). Believing one's groupmate over members of other groups is not unjust under normal circumstances; it can, in fact, be good for building trust. However, if these groups align with the social divisions that promote inequalities, then favouring one's own may lead to the powerful discounting the testimonies of the less powerful, causing a structural testimonial injustice (Anderson, 2012).

Shared reality bias refers to the tendency for people who regularly interact to end up creating similar views or collective ways of framing the world (Echterhoff and Higgins, 2025). Creating harmony in terms of language use is beneficial for arriving at a consensus; this is generally not an unjust practice, but may sometimes make it hard for people to absorb new framings from those who hold different views. It becomes structural testimonial injustice when these groupings are grounded in social structures of segregation and the advantaged deem the disadvantaged person's speech unintelligent or unintelligible, and award them less credibility as a result (Anderson, 2012).

Preventing others from expressing their epistemic agency constitutes an *epistemic oppression* (Dotson, 2014; Warman, 2021). As previously mentioned, part of what makes people who they are in society is their ability to share and receive knowledge, which means that once a person is denied a chance to share, they are also denied the ability to share their story, or who they are (Fricker, 2007).

Additionally, epistemic injustice harms the identity of its victims because people usually define themselves according to the groups that they belong to, such as sexual, gender, race, and others. However, belonging to a group that is discriminated against can reduce their willingness to share their story or construct who they are (Baker and Constant, 2020). If people's way of making themselves relevant in society is by sharing their stories, then denying others the opportunity to do so is like denying them a chance to exist (Fricker, 2007). In the long run, their group's constant association with negativity may lead to further psychological problems such as a lack of epistemic confidence (Fricker, 2007).

Testimonial injustice may result in unfair punishment if the listener chooses to unfairly judge the testimony of the speaker. For instance, in Harper Lee's novel, *"To Kill a Mockingbird*", Tom Robinson (a black man), was presumed guilty before trial even began due to the jury's failure to bring themselves to believe a black man over a white woman; in the end, it did not matter that evidence was presented to prove his innocence. Testimonial injustice negatively impacts individuals and society at large. Firstly, it could lead to unfair consequences, such as in Tom Robinson's case, but mainly it deprives the world of new ideas, which restricts the world from reaching its full potential in CSES contexts such as NRM that require transdisciplinarity.

In contrast to testimonial injustice's central case of credibility deficit, Anderson (2012) alerts us to the idea of *credibility excess*, that is, awarding high credibility based on who the speaker

is. Take an example of community/university engagements, where the researchers are usually easily believed by community members based, on the qualifications of the researchers. Believing someone solely based on their high status in society may seem positive at first glance, but it overlooks the uniqueness of the individual's input or testimony by perceiving them as just a member of a given group; and could thereby be seen to constitute a testimonial injustice (Anderson, 2012).

In essence, testimonial injustice is mainly transactional, meaning it takes place between people in their normal exchanges of knowledge or information. However, when individuals from marginalised groups consistently face testimonial injustice and their experiences are not taken seriously or acknowledged, it can lead to a broader hermeneutical injustice. This means that the dominant group remains ignorant or uncomprehending of the experiences and perspectives of marginalised groups, perpetuating a cycle of misunderstanding and exclusion (Medina, 2008, 2012). Moreover, testimonial injustice can be contributing factor to the broader problem of hermeneutical injustice by preventing marginalised voices from being heard and included in the collective understanding of society.

Hermeneutical Injustice:

Hermeneutical injustice happens when there is a lack of adequate concepts or language to understand and express certain experiences or forms of knowledge. This can lead to a group's experiences being overlooked or misunderstood, hindering their participation.

Hermeneutical injustice is mainly about interpretation and understanding (Fricker, 2007; Baker and Constant, 2020). Some people lack the language or words to describe their experiences to others because of prejudicial practices within the general system of society that deliberately exclude(d) certain groups of society, especially marginalised and minoritised groups, from knowledge production platforms (Fricker, 2007; Koggel, 2018, 2019). These groups were excluded, for instance, from disciplines such as academia, the law, and journalism, all of which play a significant role in generating knowledge in the mainstream (Fricker, 2007). In this case, those who were/are allowed access to knowledge production spaces either make assumptions about the experiences and needs of excluded groups, or leave these needs unaddressed, which leads to a gap in the concepts available to understand, interpret and make intelligible one's experiences.

An illustration of a gap in available concepts (or hermeneutical resources: the tools or concepts that individuals and communities use to interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world around them (Fricker, 2007)) is that before the term '*postpartum* depression' was coined, women had difficulty understanding and describing depression following the birth of their babies, which was then misinterpreted as the woman's inability to take care of her child. The term did not exist before because women (that is, the people who experience *postpartum* depression), were for a long time denied access to the knowledge creation space, which left the interpretation of their experiences in the hands of men, who in turn misinterpreted them (as a result of either lacking the interest in interpreting these areas of social experience or actively maintaining an interest in leaving these areas uninterpreted).

Moreover, the speaker's lack of epistemic concepts leads to difficulty understanding their own experiences; and reduces the ability of their hearer to fully comprehend the speaker. Without the vocabulary, one encounters difficulties in expressing their epistemic agency, which in turn leads to insufficient means to support them or intervene. Take the woman going through postpartum depression, or any form of depression; we frequently read about people committing suicide because depression is treated as a weakness, as being unable to handle life's pressures, instead of a genuine medical condition. Therefore, solutions may be delayed, or irrelevant ones be implemented, leading to no positive changes.

In the NRM context, which mainly focuses on scientific evidence, hermeneutical injustice could take the form of some of the local people's ways of interpreting the changes around them being dismissed as merely intuition or superstition. The dismissal of local knowledge because it is 'mere intuition' means that that part of their experience does not make it to the central pool of hermeneutical resources, which in turn perpetuates hermeneutical injustice (Baker and Constant, 2020). The biggest barrier to our effectiveness, and to social justice, is the fascism of our own minds (Drake *et al*., 2022:1).

The fact that some knowledge types have in some ways erased others from the knowledge system is what Santos (2015; 2016) calls 'epistemicide', meaning that some knowledge types are killed by other knowledge. Epistemicide also contributes to further reduction in our understanding of the world by attempting to suppress other forms of knowledge (Patin *et al*., 2021). The erasure of other knowledge types reduces the understanding of the world to some extent, which is a disadvantage when it comes to general decision-making that may impinge

on other people's interests (Hunter and Richmond, 2022; Warman, 2021). This brings me to relate epistemic (in)justice to concerns surrounding participation, a concept that plays a significant role in decision-making.

2.2.4 Relating epistemic injustice to concerns surrounding participation

Epistemic injustice as inhibitor

Knowledge is particularly important to NRM because of its significance for supporting learning and adaptability, both social and ecological adaptability (Beunen and Assche 2021; Folke *et al*., 2005).

The normative goal of participation is about individuals and communities being able to engage in processes of self-determination, which speaks to the idea of people being able to contribute to the process of knowledge production, sharing and interpretation (Koggel, 2019). Nancy Fraser's idea (2000) of parity of participation, which refers to the ability to interact at an equal social level with one's peers, highlights the idea of people being able to express their epistemic agency (Blue *et al*., 2019). However, people from marginalised backgrounds may enter the participatory space at a disadvantage due to late time of entry when most of the decisions have been made, which potentially limits the expression of their agency or results in tokenism as previously described in section 2.1.5 (Koggel, 2019; Kosko, 2013).

Related to the substantive goal of participation is the idea of accessing the full spectrum of perspectives and knowledge in order to generate innovative solutions to complex problems. However, if development entities overlook certain views raised by local citizens based on their knowledge and experience, this may generate a level of mistrust among the groups (Baker and Constant, 2020). The lack of trust leads to the local citizens becoming sceptical about the competence of the developers, especially if things go wrong with decisions taken against the local community's advice (Baker and Constant, 2020). Discounting other knowledge forms undermines participatory efforts because participatory approaches are based on the idea of harnessing different perspectives in order to develop a greater understanding of the system (Richmond and Hunter, 2021).

Involving people from marginalised communities into the NRM space is in itself an act towards remedying epistemic injustice because these individuals are brought in as experts in their own right, which creates a need for the expectation of respectful recognition and consideration of

their contribution to the process (Weyer, Bezerra and Vos, 2019). However, in practice, to recognise and respect some types of knowledge remains a challenge, which defeats the purpose of bringing in the different entities in the first place (Davies, 2016).

Furthermore, in the context of NRM, and CSESs in general, structural injustices have allowed westernised scientific knowledge to dominate the body of interpretive resources, while ignoring the descriptions of indigenous people, who usually depend on these resources (Koggel, 2019). There is an epistemic gap among the different actors, making it seem as though indigenous people cannot explain their experiences because their interpretive resources never made it into the mainstream knowledge-production and sharing spaces (Anderson, 2012; Baker and Constant, 2020).

Hermeneutical injustice prompts us to ask the question of how a person is expected to describe their experiences without access to the words required to do so. Being unable to express their epistemic agency here implies that their right to self-determination is not realised; and results in irrelevant interventions that local communities are not motivated to sustain. If particular participants lack the requisite epistemic resources, and are constantly being misunderstood when trying to construct their social reality, the question arises as to whose interests end up being served (Baker and Constant, 2020; Davies. 2016; Fricker, 2007).

Natural resources management takes place in diverse settings in terms of language, yet materials and processes are usually in English, accompanied by limited translation (Helm *et al*., 2024). The use of English as the primary medium of communication in contexts where local people are not used to the language makes it difficult for the local people to participate with enough understanding (Wilmot, 2024). Without properly following the discussion, one is bound to feel shy to contribute confidently, in case their contribution is off-topic (Zheng and Qui, 2024). This raises the question of whether the voices present in the participatory space interact with equal power and agency (Baker and Constant, 2020).

In this way, epistemic injustice is more consistent with instrumental approaches to participation which sometimes deny those from marginalised backgrounds without trained expertise to become part of the decision-making processes.

Epistemic justice as an enabler

Epistemic justice, on the other hand, is the goal of rectifying these injustices. It aims to ensure that all individuals and groups have a fair and equal opportunity to contribute their knowledge, experiences, and perspectives in decision-making processes. Epistemic justice refers to coming up with practical solutions to become just in the way we interact with others, and how we receive and share knowledge in collaborative spaces (Fricker, 2007).

Because people typically use stereotypes to afford credibility, Fricker (2007) suggests that we learn to be mindful of the prejudices that we may hold against certain speakers when we enter a deliberative space, so that we may find it within ourselves to be able to neutralise the prejudice. In the same way, when confronted with a situation where it is clear that the speaker is finding it difficult to relate their experiences, whether in terms of limited language proficiency or lack of words or concepts to describe them, the hearer can imagine the information being shared in a prejudice-free zone before judging its credibility. In the case of researchers who do not speak the local language, maybe recording the home language and then translating and mirroring back to make sure that everything was captured well could be a solution. The two instances referred to speak to correcting epistemic injustices at an individual level.

Anderson (2012) suggests that some of the epistemic injustices are rooted in structural forces, as can be the case in NRM, and therefore require structural remedies. For instance, in the South African case, which is the focus in this research, high-quality education remains inaccessible to the majority of the rurally-based, black and poor population, which continues to limit their ability to participate confidently in collaborative spaces, especially those involving academia or academics. Anderson (2012) suggests that these structural causes of epistemic injustices, such as markers of credibility, ethnocentrism, and shared reality bias require structural remedies. Structural remedies could be things like working on ways to make the education system accessible to the majority of the population, through for instance, awarding scholarships to those from marginalised backgrounds. Another example is the idea of getting those from marginalised and non-marginalised backgrounds to interact more, such as is the case with bringing them into the NRM space, as a way to develop more shared reality biases (Anderson, 2012). An example is the ‘learning words’ workshops held by the

Governance Community of Practice in the Tsitsa Project in order to create a vocabulary that would be accessible to both researchers and residents (Palmer *et al*., 2022).

It is important to recognise epistemic injustices and encourage marginalised individuals to share their knowledge to avoid losing valuable information. Applying the concept of epistemic justice to stakeholder participation in NRM allows me to imagine a future filled with people who can better listen to each other, and who have better common understanding of the world; being able to improve our understanding of the layers of complexity underpinning the management processes towards sustaining CSESs.

In summary, power dynamics and epistemic injustice are central to understanding the differences between instrumental and emancipatory approaches to participation. With instrumental approaches, power tends to be concentrated, and epistemic injustice may occur when certain voices are marginalised or dismissed. Emancipatory approaches seek to challenge and rebalance power dynamics, actively addressing epistemic injustice by valuing diverse knowledge systems and experiences. Achieving epistemic justice in participation involves recognising and rectifying the injustices that can occur when diverse voices and forms of knowledge are excluded or marginalized in decision-making processes. It calls for a commitment to inclusivity, the recognition of different types of knowledge, and efforts to reduce bias and prejudice in these spaces.

2.3 Why do participants participate?

Factors that influence the initiation of participation include personal motivation, triggers, resources and opportunities (Brodie *et al*, 2009).

2.3.1 Personal motivations

Personal motivations refer to the underlying reasons and desires that drive an individual to engage in a particular activity. Cincera *et al*., (2019) differentiate between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, where intrinsic motivations relate more to emancipatory approaches and extrinsic motivation aligns more with instrumental approaches.

Personal values: the beliefs and value systems of those involved, which are often a result of their social experiences (Gustafson and Hertting, 2017). Some participants are genuinely interested in the subject matter or activity; they have a passion for it and derive personal satisfaction or enjoyment from their involvement (Cincera *et al*., 2019). An individual is more

likely to be involved in activities that are personally meaningful or valuable to them, coupled with their interests and/or things they hold dear, or to influence change.

Gustafson and Hertting (2017) found three categories of motivations in their research of participant motivations for involvement. The first motivation is the *common good motive*, when someone participates because they want to improve their community (Batson *et al*., 2002; Klandermans, 2003; Palumbo, 2017). Participation can give individuals a sense of purpose and meaning. They may feel that their contributions make a difference or serve a larger cause or community. Altruism and helping others also motivates people to participate in volunteer work or charitable activities because they want to help others and contribute to the well-being of their communities or society as a whole.

The self-interest motive refers to becoming active in order to boost the person's confidence and talents and those of their family (Gustafson and Hertting, 2017). Some participants are driven by intrinsic motivations, such as a sense of accomplishment, personal growth, or a desire to learn and improve their skills (Cincera *et al*., 2019).

The third motive is the *professional competency motive*, when the goal is to develop one's abilities in order to progress one's professional career (Gustafson and Hertting, 2017). Participants engage in activities to enhance their personal or professional development. This could involve gaining new skills, knowledge, or experiences that can benefit their careers or personal lives. Long-term aspirations and desires, like pursuing a degree to fulfil a career, are included here.

Returning to personal values; participation could be part of one's life philosophy or even a religious belief. Some also argue (Elliot, 2022; Searle-Chatterjee, 1999) that the tendency to participate starts quite early in a person's life, and may be connected to family or personal socialisation, or to one's life experience. One is also more likely to participate in a cause if one has been affected by it in their life course. Curiosity about the unknown or the desire to explore new experiences can also be a powerful motivator for participation.

Participation often provides opportunities for social interaction. People may join groups, clubs, or events to connect with others who share similar interests and to build social networks (Stern, 2000). Some individuals even participate for the recognition and status that

comes with their involvement. Being seen as an expert or leader in a particular field can be a motivating factor.

There are situations where participation is driven by external factors, such as legal requirements, obligations, or societal norms (Gunningham and Sinclair, 2002). People may participate because they feel they have no other choice. Some individuals participate in activities as a form of escape or relaxation. Engaging in hobbies or leisure activities can be a way to unwind and de-stress.

It is important to recognize that individuals may have a combination of motivations, and their reasons for participation can evolve over time. Understanding why participants engage in a particular activity or context can be valuable for organisers and facilitators to create more meaningful and engaging experiences. In addition to personal motivations, there are some factors, mainly external, called triggers, that drive individuals to participate.

2.3.2 Triggers

Triggers are those external and internal factors that prompt one to want to get involved. People can be influenced to take part for some external incentives, such as monetary rewards or recognition for their efforts (Cincera *et al*., 2019). Other people may be triggered to participate in activities like sports in order to compete and outperform the rest. Other external influences can be urgent matters, such as a natural disaster, an emotional reaction such as anger, or feeling threatened; a personal life event such as a new relationship, retirement, or a new job. Being invited influential people within a community with the ability to motivate change can also be a trigger for some people to participate (Brodie *et al*., 2009).

Triggers may be short-lived in some instances, but in others they may represent a major turning point in an individual's life. However, personal motivations and triggers are not always sufficient for action to take place; resources are required to turn those desires into a reality.

2.3.3 Resources

Access to resources enables an individual to act upon their personal motivations and triggers. Resources may be practical in the form of time and money, or learning resources such as skills, knowledge, and experience, and the opportunities for transferring them to others; and/or felt resources like confidence and a sense of efficacy (Klandermans, 2003). Some people prefer to engage in activities that they know they are capable of, owing to previous experiences

(Chawla and Cushing, 2007; Lowndes *et al*., 2006). Personal relationships and networks provide both practical and emotional support and access to resources, knowledge, connections, and decision-makers (Misick and Wilson, 2008).

2.3.3 Opportunities

Opportunities include the structures such as institutions, organisations, places, or events that provide a conducive environment or platform for participation to take place (Cuyvers, Thomése and van Tilburg, 2018). Generally, people's ability to take part in different activities depends on their personal motivation or triggers, which are then brought to reality by the availability of resources and opportunities.

The conceptual understanding of participation as this key component in the self-determination process aimed at sustainable NRM, and the realisation of epistemic injustice as an inhibiting factor leads to the need to employ a philosophical lens that allows me to recognise how our knowledge is situated in our different experiences in the social world.

2.5 A critical realist view of participation in the Tsitsa Project

2.5.1 Critical realism and complex social-ecological systems

I take critical realism as a philosophical lens because it is consistent with the theoretical understanding of complex social-ecological systems (CSESs); and allows nuanced appreciation of causal mechanisms across the empirical (quantitative), actual (qualitative) and real (experience, insight and inference) domains (Cockburn, 2018; 2021). The critical realist holds that "facts and phenomena are entwined in complex contexts" (Kara 2017:48). Complex social-ecological systems involve intricate interactions between social and ecological components, making them challenging to study and manage. Both critical realism and CSESs are based on the idea that reality is made up of more layers than we can ever get hold of, and trying to understand any part of it is like peeling an onion, differentiating between experiences and scientific knowledge, and uncovering the underlying influences (Forsyth, 2008). The link between CSESs and critical realism is meaningful to me because I accept that we arrive at knowledge of the situation "through assessing the complexity in context" (Kara 2017: 48). This coheres with the appreciation that social phenomena need interpretive understanding, and therefore, we cannot have an 'objective' view of reality from any one perspective (Hunter and Richmond, 2022); rather there are many possibly valid accounts of

any phenomenon (e.g., the different narratives of participation in this study). Our incomplete understanding of the world requires that we engage in flexible learning-by-doing approaches to action, in for example, natural resource management, with a willingness to reflect and learn as we go (Ison, 2010; Spies, 2020). The commitment of this research is a reflexive approach to the exploration of participation in the Tsitsa Project (TP).

Indeed, critical realism urges us to take some time to reflect carefully on the impacts of the social world on our perceptions of the world, including how we attach meaning and attribute causation (Rutzou, 2008). The idea is to base our explanations and interpretations on historical inquiry into previous encounters, and what has influenced our actions and interactions. Issues of causation are based on a careful analysis of one's social world in terms of incomplete patterns, realities and previous activities, as a basis for increased understanding of the complex and layered structures that cause those patterns, realities and activities. It is about embracing the idea of knowledge about reality being socially situated, which implies that we frame the world based on different influences, and that knowledge changes or is transformed by our social interactions (Cornwall, 2001) which is why methodological pluralism is required to embrace the diverse ways of framing the world. This acknowledgement of our incomplete understanding of the world, and the need to be reflexive in our efforts to understand the world resonates with the ideas of managing CSESs that are continuously changing.

Applying a critical realist approach to CSESs allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the interconnectedness between human societies and the natural environment. It facilitates the identification of underlying structural issues, causal mechanisms, and contextual factors that influence both social behaviours and ecological outcomes. This, in turn, can inform more effective strategies for managing and sustaining these intricate systems.

2.5.2 Using critical realism's iceberg metaphor to penetrate the invisible and thick experience of participation through narrative inquiry and poetic inquiry

Critical realism (CR) emerges from the writings of Baskar (e.g. 1994, current perspectives: Cockburn, 2021; Lawami, 2021). The 'critical realism iceberg' metaphor can be helpful when conducting the narrative inquiry and poetic inquiry of this study, to explore and penetrate the invisible and thick experiences of participation. The CR iceberg (Figure 2.4), (Shefield *et al*.,

2012) represents the idea that observable events and phenomena at the tip of the iceberg are driven by underlying causal mechanisms, structures and deeper realities, with many submerged beneath the surface. In the context of CSESs, the iceberg suggests that what is visible is just a fraction of the entire picture, and understanding the hidden, often complex, causal mechanisms is crucial for a more comprehensive analysis. This metaphor underscores the importance of going beyond surface-level observations, with observable cause-and-effect linkages, to uncover the deeper forces shaping these systems (Lawami, 2020).

The iceberg illuminates how different layers of increasing system complexity can be investigated and understood (Figure 2.4). The empirical domain can be investigated quantitively and causality inferred statistically. In the actual domain, emergent properties, contexts and histories can be qualitatively investigated and causality inferred by logical argument. In the real domain, phenomena are appreciated through insight and experience, and causality inferred imaginatively and creatively.

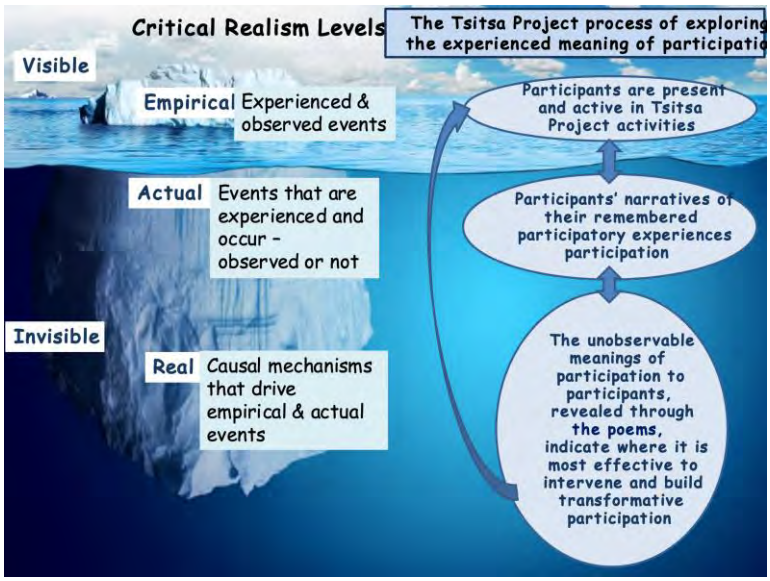


Figure 2.4: illustration of the way the iceberg model was applied in the context of this study

The CR also aligns well with the transdisciplinary (TD) approach, which involves integrating knowledge and methods from different disciplines and knowledge forms, with a range of involved people, to tackle complex problems (Palmer *et al*., 2023). In this context, the iceberg metaphor highlights that collaborating across disciplines, knowledge forms, and among different people, allows us to explore not only the visible aspects of a problem, but also the underlying mechanisms and structures (Cockburn, 2021). Transdisciplinarity enables a deeper understanding of CSESs by addressing their multi-dimensional nature and revealing

interconnected causes and effects that might not be apparent within a single disciplinary framework (Cockburn, 2018).

Participation in the Tsitsa Project could be visualised as the involvement and presence of the different stakeholders in the diverse project activities, representing the empirical domain, where we could observe and even count how many people were present per activity. The narratives that were told by the participants represent the actual domain in that they give an account of the events that the participants experienced, whether visible or not/ observed or not, that is, the underlying mechanisms that generated what was observed as people engaged in the different TP activities. For instance, in the TP, the visible could be the preparation work by the TP team before the event, and the invisible could be the team's competence or incompetence in doing the work, where the quality of facilitation is of particular importance. The poems are placed in the real domain because they reveal those unobservable entities or forces that shape the actual and empirical domains.

The three domains are interconnected such that the real domain influences the actual domain, which in turn, generates observable events or experiences in the empirical domain. The critical realism iceberg metaphor aligns with narrative and poetic inquiries by highlighting the need to go beyond surface-level narratives to explore the hidden, deeper dimensions of participation. These research methods provided tools for me to access and convey the often invisible and thick layers of meaning and experience that shape individuals' participation in various contexts.

Summary: This exploration of the literature-based framing of participation in NRM leads to Chapter 3, where I detail the methodology and methods that are consistent with this framing.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The methodology and method was profoundly influenced by the positionality of the researcher. I reflect on this the reflection prologue at the beginning of the thesis.

Building on the literature-based framing of this thesis, Chapter 3 details the methodology and methods used to generate and analyse data in this thesis.

3.1. Methodology

The methodology derives from a critical realist perspective (Bhaskar, 2009; 2020; Bhaskar and Hartwig, 2010; Fletcher, 2017) and the quality of 'thick' accounts, out of Geertz' (2008) emergent grounded theory. Though as I will show, in this situated practice, and in an apparent contradiction, it is the piercing thinness of poetry that provides the 'thickness' or depth.

A qualitative research approach was used to conduct inquiries for this research because the purpose of this research was to explore how the participants experienced participation in their lives, leading up to, and within, the Tsitsa Project (TP). Qualitative approaches offer a way to provide a detailed account of the subject of study and can provide an in-depth understanding of the matter through open-ended questions, with no previously determined responses (Butina, 2015). The open-endedness of questions can lead to thick accounts of people's experiences and views and, so, a better understanding of a small number of people (Geertz, 2008; Lee, Kinzie, and Whittaker, 2012). This deep understanding is particularly helpful in the context of the TP, where people from different backgrounds, both professionally and personally, interact towards a common purpose.

Qualitative research mandates that investigators be transparent about their subjectivities, acknowledging how personal identities—such as history, gender, race, and class—shape their worldview and, consequently, what they are able to perceive and interpret. These positional influences invariably guide decisions around data collection, analysis, and representation. It is therefore essential that researchers not only remain critically reflexive about their own biases but also make those biases explicit, as they inevitably shape the interpretation of data. Reflexivity should extend beyond personal acknowledgement to epistemological reflexivity—assessing how our frames of reference determine what counts as valid knowledge (Karcher et al., 2024). My positionality (as a researcher in this study) is provided in Section 5.5.1.

In all, qualitative research is rooted in the understanding and interpretation of social phenomena from the perspective of participants. There are many qualitative approaches to research inquiry, but in this study, I used case study, narrative inquiry and poetic inquiry, since they all emphasise and uncover participants' subjective experiences, meanings, and interpretations. The case study approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of real-life situations, providing a context for my research (Markowitz, 2016). Through narrative inquiry I captured the stories and experiences of the individuals within the case – the TP (Simon, 2009). I further employed poetic inquiry as a complementary methodology so as to move into a more imaginative and expressive exploration of the stories. In terms of a critical realist perspective, I move from the visible to the invisible (Figure 2.4 iceberg).

3.1.1 Case Study

A case study is an in-depth exploration of an event or phenomenon in its context (Brown, 2008; Crowe *et al*., 2011). Given the time limits of research, a case study enables a deeper knowledge of the case within its singular character without the need to compare it to others, providing a rich context for what is being investigated or researched (Markowitz, 2016). The ability of a case study approach to provide a textured understanding of the case in its context is useful for researching complex social-ecological systems (CSESs) where context plays a vital role (Cilliers 2000; Wong, 2018). The particularity of the information yielded by placing focus on a given case also allows for better customisation of the lessons learnt and recommendations from the research, which could work towards implementing relevant interventions in and beyond the case (Brown, 2008).

Stake (1995) differentiates the uses of a case study into intrinsic, collective, and instrumental, case studies. An intrinsic case study places focus on a special case in order to learn more about its particular features, such as the farming practices of smallholder farmers in the specific context of climate change. A collective case study is when many cases are studied at the same time in order to gain a broader perspective on an issue of interest, such as trying to understand the adaptation strategies used by smallholder farmers by watching more than one area to draw lessons from. An instrumental case study is when a particular case is used to gain a deeper perspective of a given issue, which applies to the research reported here.

For case study research, interpretation is based on a 'bounded system' (Cresswell, 1998; Brown, 2008). In this research, interpretation is bounded within the TP participation system,

and aims to arrive at an insightful understanding of participation. The findings of a case study cannot be easily generalised to other contexts, but lessons can be drawn for similar cases through an understanding of principles (Brown, 2008; Pearson, 2007). Even though a case may be useful for investigating or exploring a single issue or phenomenon, the case itself is made up of integrated elements to form a bounded system in complex ways (Stake, 1995). Participation in the TP is in itself a complex system, and I have identified pertinent elements of the system as the different categories of stakeholder participants within the bounded system and the different activities that these stakeholders took part in (Figure 3.5). The participant narratives allow me to build a nuanced picture so that participation is in itself a system that I am trying to understand. There are other factors such as participant history of participation, beyond the bounded TP system, that affect our system of participation in the TP (Figure 3.5). Therefore, in eliciting narratives, attention is also paid to experiences of participation before the TP.

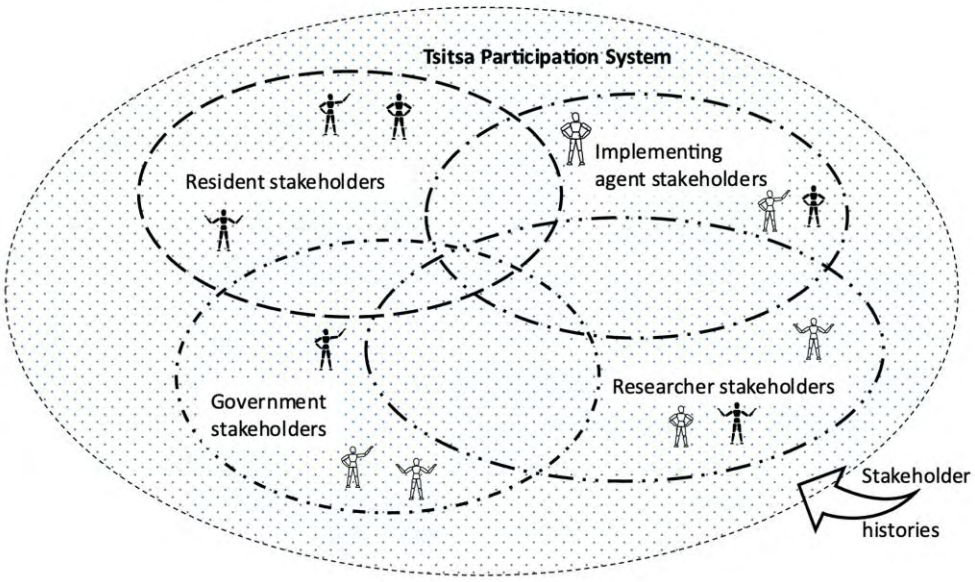


Figure 3.5: The Tsitsa Project participation system, indicating the cross-boundary influence of participant histories

A good way to understand a case is through the subjective views of the participants, in terms of how they frame the world, together with how these constructions are influenced by the researchers who interpret them (Simon, 2009). The ability of a case study to situate people in

real-life situations is also helpful for exploring and better understanding a phenomenon (Cohen, 2000). The distinctive stories that shed light on some of the underlying problems that contribute to the structure (Figure 3.5) and meaning in a particular context are what distinguish each case (Simon, 2009). Given that these stories are conveyed differently, I have adopted narrative inquiry to understand the stories that make up the TP participation story.

Finally, using a case study approach allowed me to consider participation as a socially constructed concept whose meaning changes with human interactions and experiences. Through a case study, I discovered a more holistic understanding of the complex interactions among the social and biophysical elements in the TP that influence participation.

3.1.2 Narrative inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research where raw data consists of stories (Butina, 2015). An important component of narrative inquiry is differentiating between a story and a narrative, as the two are often casually used interchangeably. A story refers to the ideas or events that make up a narrative; telling us the 'who' and 'what' (Cobley, 2009). To use an analogy, think of the difference between building materials and a building. Just as builders use materials to construct buildings in different ways for different purposes based on their design, so too narrators draw on stories to construct narratives for particular purposes based on their interpretation. A story can be represented in multiple ways depending on the purpose or interpretation of the person telling it. In short, a story is an idea, or set of ideas, represented through a narrative.

Narrative inquiry relies on the assumption that the stories that make up a person's narrative can reveal the identity of the narrator, and give context to how they view the world, or how they construct meaning in the world (Bamberg, 2012, 2020). The purpose of narrative research is to examine how meaning can be attributed to individual experiences, and how stories can be presented in light of the narrator's history (Bold, 2012). The narrative also contains both the voices of the narrator and the person eliciting the story (Beuthin, 2014). The two voices must be carefully distinguished in the analysis of the narrative.

A narrative of participation could reveal the reality of a participatory process in a new, more encompassing, complex, and nuanced way; because the emergent properties of a participatory process are not captured by adding up the sum of its parts, but through the

poetics of its narrative (that is, how each individual presents their experiences and explains why the participatory process happened the way that it did, which may be either planned or unexpected) (Turnhout, Bomel and Aarts, 2010). Narratives can also help us to unpick threads of epistemic justice and injustice and allow us to see the participatory process as part of a CSES by combining multiple views into an overall narrative of participation. The narrative created, then, captures multiple perspectives and realities like a prism captures multiple spectrums of light and reflects them as one clear white light.

The dominant use of numerical representation of landscape change lacks the human experience of these changes; narratives convey human reasoning and experience on top of the statistical representation of the situation (Arce-Nazario, 2007; Hampton, 2004). The human narration of events is valuable because people have watched changes that affect their lives. Narratives tell a story of how people perceive or interpret these changes and how they position themselves in the process (Reissman, 2007). In addition, it is through narratives that we can identify contradictions between what is reported in research and how participants experience the process. The access to different ways of knowing that is granted by narratives is therefore useful in studying CSESs such as the Tsitsa catchment (Paschen and Ison, 2014).

Paying attention to diverse details can help researchers to discover some of the battles that participants are fighting, which may be hidden by their feeling a need to be accepted in the participatory space (Brushwood Rose, 2019). Narratives are also useful to uncover any strongly held positions, as well as values held by participants, that could play a significant role in determining the outcome of a project as a whole (Hampton, 2004).

The narrative approach is a useful way both to look at participation as situated practice and to acquire a clear idea of what participation looks like for each individual (Cornwall, 2017). Do participants hold contradicting views about participation in the TP? And what role do the contradictory views (if any) play in participatory spaces towards the participatory governance of natural resources? Particular attention will be paid to the basis of participation, specifically in terms of experiences of respect and inclusion, and of a participant having sufficient knowledge and understanding to participate actively and effectively. Experiencing respect and having knowledge are taken here to be indications of epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007).

In using narrative inquiry, I sought to better understand the underlying factors that influenced the TP stakeholders in the form of their experiences of participation, with the vision of

improving collaborative processes and ultimately, landscape sustainability. The use of narrative inquiry allowed me to gain both a better understanding and a memorable view of the lives of the stakeholders who chose to participate in the TP. Narrative inquiry also enabled me to keep their stories intact, as told from their perspectives and in their voices (Riessman, 2008; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Therefore, narrative inquiry could allow me to derive meaning attached to how the participants viewed the world while remaining respectful of their voices.

3.1.3 Poetic Inquiry

Poetic inquiry is a type of qualitative research that includes poetry as a part of the investigation (Prendergast, 2009; Wu, 2021). It emphasises creative expression and metaphorical language. Poetic inquiry aligns with and complements narrative inquiry as both approaches share a focus on personal experiences, storytelling, and the subjective interpretation of meaning. In this way, poetic inquiry could be said to intertwine elements of poetry and narrative inquiry. Poetry serves as a powerful medium for capturing and conveying lived experiences, emotions, and complex ideas.

By drawing out different poetic sensibilities, including the artistic and aesthetic, sincere and transformative elements of a story emerge, allowing poetry to appeal to a wider range of audiences (McKenna-Buchanan, 2018). Poetry's ability to appeal to a wider audience is especially helpful in the context of the TP, which engaged stakeholders from different backgrounds, especially in terms of making knowledge and experiences accessible across stakeholder groups (Sjollema *et al*., 2012).

Poetry may give a voice to a variety of audiences, who primarily understand poetry based on how much it mirrors their own knowledge and experiences (Furman, 2007). It might provide those audiences, who have not been given enough attention or representation, a voice (Illingworth, 2022). Poetic inquiry not only raises the voices of the participants, but it also highlights the contradictions and dilemmas that exist within a single story, sustaining the richness of participants' lived experiences (Richardson, 2012; Wiebe, 2015).

In addition, poetic inquiry may enable a larger audience to interact with scientific findings by connecting them to individual experiences (Illingworth, 2022; Richardson, 2012). The poetic form allows for a more nuanced exploration of research data, enabling multiple layers of

meaning and evoking emotional resonance. Illingworth (2022) asserts that poetry can advance scientific communication by using approachable, straightforward language and terms that are common in ordinary speech. Even though the reflection offered by narrative inquiry is important in telling the stories within the system, poetic inquiry depicts my participants' experiences more authentically by employing both the rational and intuitive modes of knowing (Prendergast, 2009). It allowed me to discuss the findings of my research in a way that would not have been conceivable if I had used just a few brief quotes from the original narratives to illustrate my argument (Faulkner, 2017; Fernandez-Gimeneza *et al*., 2019).

Poetic inquiry has the power to transform because of poetry's capacity to engage the mind and emotions of its audience. Poetry is also said to encourage greater reflexivity on the part of the researcher, to become more aware of their role in the research process and to think about the research process holistically, that is, without separating themselves or even the research participants out from the research outcomes (Fernandez-Gimeneza *et al*., 2019; Simons, 2009; van Rooyen and d'Abdon, 2020). As with all qualitative approaches, poetic inquiry forced me to reflect on how my own voice, experiences, and artistic choices shaped the poetic representations and the overall meaning-making process of the participant narratives (Chapter 6).

Poetic inquiry is both a method and a result of inquiry (Cutts and Waters, 2019). Poetry can serve as a data source, a lens for analysis and interpretation, as well as a tool for presentation. As a result, poems are created using various text types, by the researcher, participants, or both. Poetic inquiry can take the form of transcription where the poems are made from participant narratives and reflect the voice and experiences of the narrator through the researcher's lens (Prendergast, 2009, as used in this study). Other types of poetry are more reflective because they draw on the researcher's reflections of the study process or of the data gathered through field notes. Others are based on literature, and the researcher reflects on the results of previous research in these cases.

In this study, poetic transcriptions were created by transforming the participant narratives into a poetic or artistic form (Figure 3.6). Poetic transcriptions entail turning qualitative data into a poem or poetic structure that, in turn, gives an interpretive narrative (Glesne 1997; Illingworth, 2022; Richardson, 2001). Poetic transcriptions are sometimes referred to as

'found poetry' (Butler-Kisber, 2010), and 'transcript' or 'research poems' (Faulker 2009; Prendergast, 2006). Even though they are sometimes used interchangeably, these differ in that for instance, found poems are created out of existing written materials such as newspaper articles, books, or any form of written material to extract unintended meaning out of the original text, while poetic transcriptions are primarily intended to elevate qualitative data into something more artistic and meaningful (Illingworth, 2022). Poetic transcription relies on pre-existing qualitative data sets such surveys, interviews and field notes.

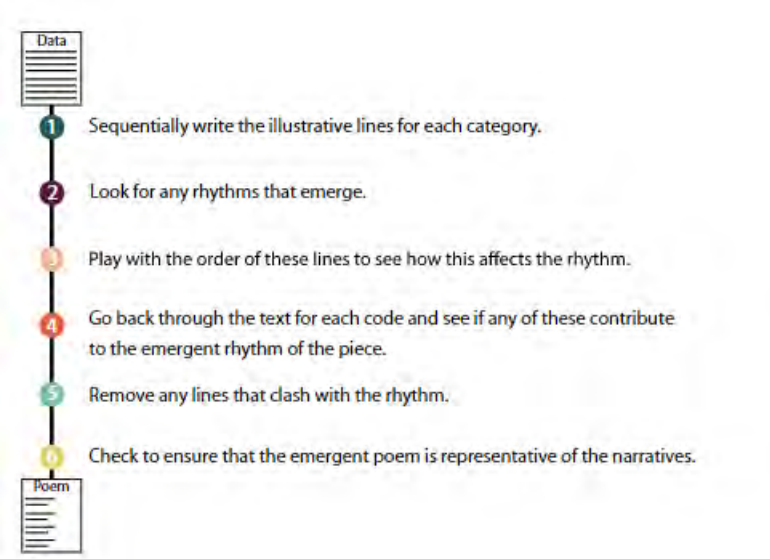


Figure 3.6: The six-step guide I adapted for writing a transcribed poem (Illingworth, 2022)

A poetic representation aids in bringing the essence of lived experience to life by showing rather than explaining and by placing participants' voices more prominently in the work, thereby involving the reader more deeply (Denzin, 2003; Furman *et al*., 2006; Simons, 2009). Poetic representation transforms the research findings, insights, and interpretations into poetic forms, such as poems, verses, or prose poems. This process allows for a more nuanced and embodied expression of the research outcomes.

A possible challenge or limitation with this approach is the subjectivity in interpretation or potential difficulties in achieving rigour and generalizability. However, as already noted in the section focusing on the case study approach, the hope for this study is to generate principles that can be drawn on in similar situations. Alongside narrative inquiry, poetic inquiry offers a creative and transformative lens, facilitates deeper understanding and elucidation of causal

mechanisms of the participants' experiences, and provides a platform for marginalised perspectives.

3.2. Methods

3.2.1 Sampling Procedure

Sampling refers to the ways in which the researcher searches for places or people who can provide information that is relevant for their study. Qualitative approaches often rely on deliberate methods of sample selection including purposive sampling, snowball sampling, convenience sampling and criterion sampling.

Purposive sampling (Campbell *et al*., 2020) was used to select the participants for this study. Purposive sampling is a method of participant selection where the driving factor is how well the participants fit the criteria required to provide relevant information about the topic or phenomenon of interest. To draw a purposive sample, a researcher begins with specific perspectives in mind that he or she wishes to examine and then seeks out research participants who cover that full range of perspectives. While purposive sampling is often used when one's goal is to include participants who represent a broad range of perspectives, it may also be used when a researcher wishes to include people who meet very narrow or specific criteria.

Thus, in this study, purposive sampling was used to select participants based on the criteria that they are functionally part of the TP participatory system (Figure 3.6), having participated in at least one TP engagement, as either Tsitsa catchment residents, academic researchers, government officials, or private implementing agencies (described in Section 1.2.2).

Snowball sampling (Parker *et al*., 2019) was used to find additional people willing to take part in the study. The snowball sampling technique is where people who are already participating in a research study identify and recommend other people who fit the selection criteria (Parker *et al*., 2019; Goodman, 1961). In this case, the TP monitors who took part in the TP as primary respondents were asked to recommend one or two other people from their area who might be willing to take part. Where representation was a challenge, the TP catchment coordinator suggested names due to her better understanding and knowledge of the people who had engaged with the TP.

The sample size was 17 participants, consisting of eight residents, five researchers, two government officials, and two implementing agents (consultants who implemented landscape restoration for government).

3.2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

This section describes the iterative process of collecting, generating and analysing data in this study. The section starts by describing the steps that were taken to become familiar with the context, followed by a description of the early data collection process through narrative interviews, and ends with the description of an iterative process of further data generation and analysis through poetic transcription.

Narrative interviews

As the most common form of qualitative data collection, an interview is a structured or purposeful conversation between one who seeks information and one who gives responses to questions (Oakley, 1998; Jamshed, 2015). There are different ways to conduct interviews, such as structured interviews, which are primarily used to test a hypothesis, and semi-structured interviews with one primary question followed by other follow-up questions in the form of an interview guide for in-depth or thicker accounts (Jamshed, 2015; DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). An interview guide is a flexible tool used to drive an interview that gives the respondent an opportunity to respond freely and the interviewer the ability to adapt their questions based on the direction of the conversation (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). The openness of an interview guide allows for the emergence of unexpected responses and knowledge.

Narrative interviews are semi-structured interviews that highlight the contexts in which stories are constructed, as well as the factors that produce change and motivate the actions of informants (Muylaert *et al*., 2014; Ison *et al*., 2014). Narrative interviews are directed at finding out about human experience or designed in a way that results in a participant narrating a sequence of events (Bold, 2012). In this research, I sought to understand the participatory experiences of the different TP stakeholders, from as far back as they could remember, up to the TP. Narrative interviews gave me a better and closer look into their identities and personalities and allowed the participants to give deep descriptions of their stories of participation over time, ranging from the kinds of events or activities they took part

in, to how they experienced these different activities (Beuthin, 2014). The information gathered was to help in drawing lessons of how these different experiences influenced how they framed the world, and participation in particular (Moen, 2006).

Based on Creswell (2013), the following steps were undertaken to conduct the narrative interviews:

Preparation phase: All participants were asked to pick a date and time that would suit them. With the prevailing Covid-19 restrictions, only seven interviews were conducted face-to-face, while the other 10 were conducted via Zoom, an internet-mediated mode of communication that helped to overcome issues of distance and access during the movement restriction period. The Covid-19 pandemic created a unique situation that required social distancing to curb the spread of the virus. This public health crisis brought up concerns that forced most work to be done remotely, including research that needed to be ongoing while considering the ethical aspects protecting the participants, researchers and in this case, the public at large.

For the participants whom I interviewed online, a zoom link was sent to them the day before their interview. The TP stakeholders all had Zoom on either their phone or computer and had undergone a short training on how to use it as part of the TP's skills development and capacity building. The participants' familiarity with Zoom reduced my fear that people would feel intimidated to use the new technology, which would inhibit their ability to calmly narrate their stories. The participants, especially the residents, were asked if they preferred the interview to be conducted in the English language or in isiXhosa, mainly because even though most resident-participants could follow the discussions that were held in English, they preferred to respond in isiXhosa, except for one participant who preferred Sesotho, my own first language. Given that it was known that many resident-participants preferred to speak in their own language, an isiXhosa translator was always made available to be part of the interviews where the participant requested such. The translator was an individual who was familiar with the TP and with the people, so she had also built a relationship of trust with the community and within the community of practice. Tschunkert (2020) emphasises that the translator puts their mark on each stage of the interpretation processes influenced by overlapping identities.

Initialization: On the day of the interview, I would begin the interview with a short well-being conversation to break the ice. I then asked for permission to record the interview and went

through the consent form together with the participant to attain verbal consent. One-on-one narrative interviews, sometimes including a translator, were conducted via recorded Zoom (video) calls, or reverting to audio when video was either completely impossible or not accepted by the participant.

Main narration: For this step, I gave a short introduction of what my study aimed to achieve as well as why the research came about in the first place. This introduction included telling the participant that the TP was intended to be participatory, but that there was no agreed-upon meaning of what that participation was, and that was what had led to my question, as the lack of an explicit definition or conceptualisation of the term 'participation' could have different impacts on the participants in terms of their experiences. I mentioned that participation meant different things to different people, and that I was interested in exploring what 'participation' meant for those who engaged in the TP at an individual level. I also explained that the research was based on the idea that it is through one's history that one comes to understand who they are and how they frame meaning in the world, and that the narrative interview would be used to explore participants' experiences of participation, both in the broader sense and in the TP context.

In this way, a semi-structured interview guide (Jamshed, 2014) was used, with one similar starting question for all, which was: *Please tell me your history of participation, that is*: *Where have you participated, and what your experiences were in each event?* For each participant, questions that followed depended on how they responded to this initial question, but they were along the lines of what motivated them to want to take part in particular activities, especially those they mentioned, and also what their expectations were from participating in these activities (Fischer, 2006). Another similar question was: *What was your experience of participating in the TP*? I followed up or probed further, depending on the participant's responses. On average, each interview lasted for about 90 minutes (Moser and Korstjens, 2018). Because the goal of this study was to elicit the uniqueness of each story and each voice, there was no questionnaire, which allowed me to engage better with each participant and ask questions based on what they had decided to narrate after the first question mentioned in this paragraph.

Using internet technologies (Zoom) as a research medium

Given the restrictions placed on movement during the Covid-19 pandemic, Zoom offered convenience through access, time effectiveness, and cost effectiveness (Gray *et al*., 2020).

The residents who worked for the TP were given cell phones as part of their work package, and constantly received mobile data from the project. Having work phones made it easier to access them than if they had to use their personal cell phones and load and use their own data. Zoom also offered flexibility in terms of when and where the interviews could take place. Zoom interviews were conducted at a participant-selected location (usually closer to home), which decreased travel time and costs. As a result, when people's plans unexpectedly changed, or network issues made it impossible for the interview to proceed, it was less inconvenient for both parties because no trip was necessary (Gray *et al*., 2020; Oliffe *et al*., 2021). The participants were also able to pick a location that was comfortable, safe, and allowed for minimal interruptions for the smooth running of the interview. If the participant was unable to commit to an interview during the day, then they could pick an evening time without worrying about the usual risks associated with travelling at night. In this way, the health and safety of both participants and the researcher/ interviewer were ensured.

Furthermore, given that all the participants in this study had access to the internet, and to either a computer, a phone and/or a tablet allowed the inclusion of participants who would otherwise have been excluded due to circumstances that may not permit personal contact such as long distances, lack of transport, and childcare (Gary *et al*., 2020). Using Zoom also increased access to more people in a shorter period, and reduced the risks associated with unpredictable weather conditions (Sedgwick and Spiers, 2009). In terms of ethics, participants were at liberty to leave the interview through the click of a button if they felt uncomfortable (Gary *et al*., 2020). Zoom was also selected, from among other online options, due to better security to ensure the privacy and security of the participants (Archibald *et al*., 2019). Finally, Zoom allowed recordings to be stored directly onto my computer instead of online where it is not easy to trace who has access to the recording.

In terms of being user-friendly, it is easy to log into Zoom when a link is sent, and both the researchers and participants were trained to use the platform (Archibald *et al*., 2019). After training, and having attended several Zoom meetings and workshops and courses, the participants in this study were comfortable during the narrative interviews. They

(participants) could recognise if one of us had disconnected and would reconnect as often as possible without giving up, thanks to their prior experience with different technical issues. Although participants were given the option of audio calls, the researcher negotiated for videos wherever possible, in order to add the personal connection of a face-to-face engagement. However, the context of this study did not permit for much video calling due to the poor network connection in some areas of the Tsitsa Catchment, which sometimes became highly disrupted when videos were used.

Another advantage of using Zoom to collect qualitative data was the ability it offered to maintain or build rapport (Archibald *et al*., 2019). Rapport refers to the ability of people to relate better with each other, for effective communication (Abbe and Brandon, 2013). Although the majority of the Zoom interviews in this study were conducted via audio only, rapport had already been built during face-to-face interactions during earlier TP engagements, as well as a short catch-up conversation before commencing with the interview. An unintended way of building rapport emerged through mutual problem-solving when technical issues arose on either side of the call (Archibald *et al*., 2019). I also made verbal remarks such as saying 'Yes' to agree, laughing when sensing a joke, and employing other verbal reactions that assured the participant that I was following their narrative. In this way, trust emerged out of the interaction in an unintended way out of the nature of the relationship and the complex social-ecological systems (CSESs) context. Creativity and communication skills were required to minimise communication breakdowns, while allowing the participant to speak as much as possible (Nurieva and Garaeva, 2020).

There were also certain disadvantages associated with internet technologies, including Zoom. Losing the face-to-face interaction or even video was a disadvantage because it meant losing much of the non-verbal communication with participants. In addition, a personal touch required, especially when participants were sharing their personal stories, was also lost by talking to a blank screen. Bad internet connections led to many interruptions of the conversation, or the meeting being postponed to another date (Archibald *et al*., 2019). Furthermore, people did not feel obliged to really commit themselves due to a lack of direct contact and some people dropped out in the middle of the narrative interview, which was easier to do than in face-to-face interactions where it might be awkward to leave the interviewer in the room (Nurieva and Garaeva, 2020). Even though I may have wanted the

conversation to be as casual as possible in order for the narrator to be comfortable, they may also have experienced some pressure to get to their point quickly before interruptions occurred.

The level of rapport developed and the ability to enjoy other benefits of face-to-face interpersonal interaction depends on several factors. For instance, the personalities of both the researcher and the participant can sometimes present a challenge to building rapport in an online setting (Oliffe *et al*., 2021). Zoom interviews also depend on the researcher being fully organised and prepared to keep the interview interactive and lift the general pressure off the participant, as well as ensure that they can help the participant in case of technical glitches. Given this, many authors recommend some form of communication between the two people before the actual interview takes place; this could be an email or even a phone call (Archibald *et al*., 2019). In the case of this research, as already mentioned, everyone had some form of training on how to use different applications, including Zoom, and monitors were asked to lend their work phones to their selected participants, and to guide them on how to use the phone and Zoom.

For the final feedback session with the resident participants, a face-to-face interaction was conducted due to the importance of the personal connection required when dealing with people's personal stories and experiences. This was especially important for the participants as they reported their challenges with missing out on facial expressions and lack of focus when hidden behind the screen in a study conducted by the TP team (Kulundu-Bolus *et al*., 2021).

Poetic transcription

Poetic analysis is a technique that turns data into emotive and artistic representations through creative construction, enabling the researcher to (re)arrange and construct the data with artistic sensibilities (McKenna-Buchana, 2018). Poetic analysis gives the researcher room to creatively assemble the data, a process that has the potential to (re)energize writing and research, offering a fresh perspective on the data (Brown, 2018; van Rooyen and d'Abdon, 2020). By concentrating on the subjective experience of system actors and the ways they create meaning from and interpret change, poetic analysis supports scientific methods to understanding complex system dynamics (Fernandez-Gimeneza, 2015; Fernandez-Gimeneza *et al*., 2019).

Poetic transcriptions were used to create poems in this study (Richardson, 2001). Poetic transcription is usually done through highlighting the participant's exact words and phrases to capture the essence of a participant's lived experience. The poetic transcription process was refined by paying attention to how language was used in terms of where emphases were placed, repetitions made, and pauses held, as well as other gestures that could be discerned from the recorded audio of the narrative interviews (Glesne, 1997;). This cyclical process ended with the editing and polishing of the poems into a product with which the participants and I were satisfied in terms of their voices being captured.

In what follows I elaborate further on the above, providing more detail.

Phase 1

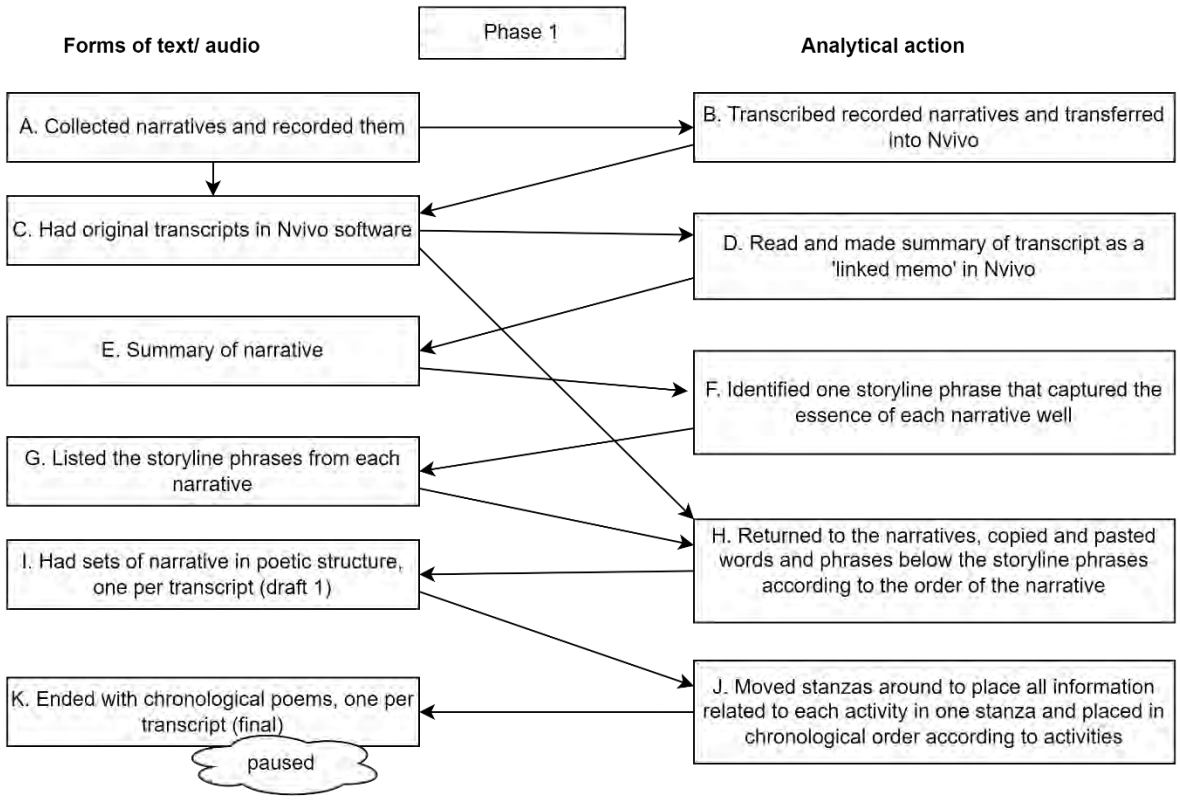


Figure 3.7: A diagram of the steps taken in the first phase of engaging with participant narrative analysis.

A. Recording of narrative: After conducting each narrative interview, I had a recording saved on the computer.

B. Translation and transcription of recorded narrative: I transcribed the narratives that were conducted using English (10) and Sesotho (1) and worked closely with the translator on the

isiXhosa (6) transcripts. Transcribing a transcript took about six hours (about 1 hour recorded interview), working to capture the voice of each participant by repeating where there were repetitions, and using different punctuation when tone of voice changed. The paragraphs were organised in dialogue format, where the first paragraph was my question to guide the participant, followed by the participant's response to the question as the next paragraph, followed by my probing questions, and participant responses. I used different fonts to differentiate between my voice as the interviewer and that of the participant as the narrator.

C. Transferring original transcripts to Nvivo: To organise the data, I transferred all the transcripts from the computer into Nvivo software. Nvivo has various features, such as 'creating a project' where I could create different folders to group the participants, and create memos, annotations, and codes to summarise and to jot down initial thoughts and ideas, to start making proper sense out of the data.

D. Summarising transcripts in linked memos: Having gained a sense of the stories from conducting the interviews and the transcription process, I again read through the transcripts in Nvivo. The memo feature in Nvivo helped me to capture the big ideas within each story. I made a linked memo in Nvivo for each transcript to summarise each narrative using as much of the participant's own wording as possible. The summary enabled me to get a more general understanding of what was on the surface of the data, without digging too much into details and specific meanings.

E. Creating a summary of the transcript: The reading and summarising process ended with a shorter version of the narrative, which was good for capturing and organising my ideas about and sense of the original.

F. Identifying the narrative storyline: Having this shorter version of the transcript allowed me to start seeing the most prominent views and perceptions of each narrative. I referred to these prominent ideas as storylines for the narratives. The storyline was made up of one striking phrase from the narrative that captured the essence of the story well.

G. Storyline phrases: Following the identification of the storylines through the summaries, I ended up with short phrases per participant or narrative.

H. Storylines as headings, populated by related text: Going back to the original transcript, I copied words and phrases from the participant's narratives, which I used to populate the

storyline identified for the particular narrative. I ended up with stanzas where each stanza was made up of words and phrases from a paragraph or response as they appeared in the transcript. My vision at this stage was to keep the narrative as intact as possible while reducing the text as much as possible into a poem structure.

I. Draft poem (draft 1): Populating the storylines resulted in a draft poem according to how the narrative was told, which was not necessarily chronological. Chronology in this context refers to the order or sequence in which the events mentioned in a narrative took place in time. When I speak about how the narrative was told I refer to the fact that some participants did not tell their narratives following a strict sequence of what took place, but what came to their memory as they were narrating their story.

J. Edited draft poem: As mentioned, the idea of a narrative is to allow the narrator to tell their story without interruptions, which means that details related to some activities within the story came later on when I began to probe, based on the entirety of the narrative that was told. The poem did not make much sense because responses related to some activities that came at the beginning of the narrative were placed towards the end of the poem with not much context to support them. I then moved words and phrases and grouped according to the activities, so that each stanza was made up of all the information related to an activity that was referred to in the narrative. In this way, each activity was described in terms of what it was, and how the participant contributed to it, what their motivation was, and what their experiences were. Following the moving around of words and phrases according to activity, I then arranged the activities into chronological order.

K. Chronological Poem (final): Moving some words and phrases around resulted in a chronological narrative poem telling the full story as narrated by the participant, and the storyline heading became the title for the chronological poem per participant.

Paused: It became apparent to me that the chronological poems did not quite appeal to any poetic sensibilities of rhythm, emotion, or even repetition, so I paused and went back to the data to try a different technique. I called it Phase 2 of engaging with the narratives.

Phase 2

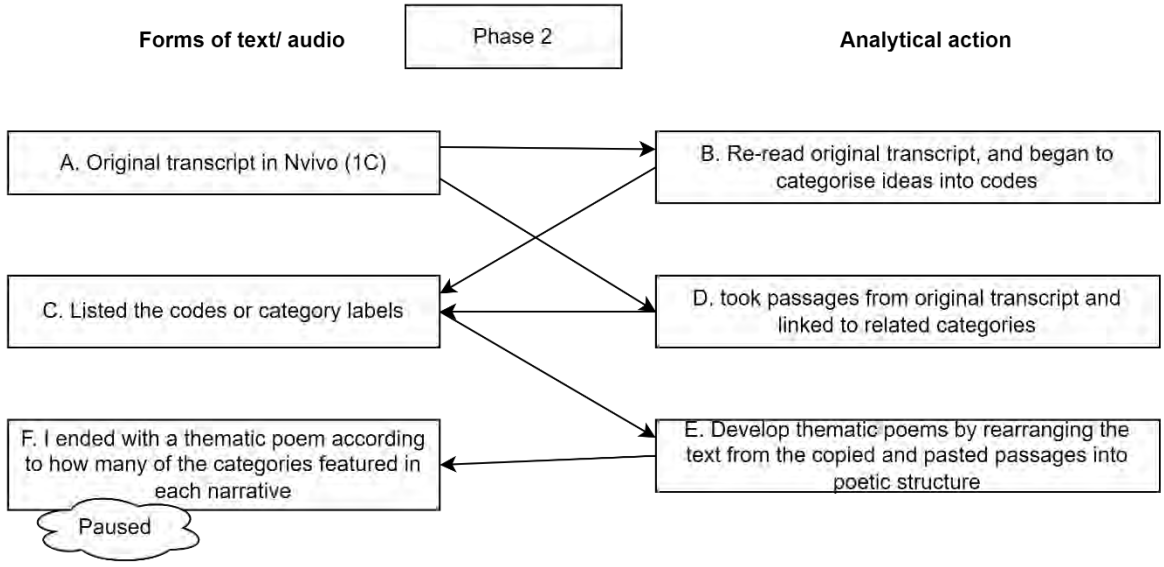


Figure 3.8: A diagram of the steps taken during the second phase of engaging with the participant narratives.

A. Original transcript: When the chronological poems did not quite achieve what I was hoping for, I put the poems aside and went back to the transcript to try another way.

B. Re-reading the original transcript: During this round of deeper reading through the transcripts, some recurring and unifying ideas began to emerge from the transcript. I used the Nvivo feature called 'nodes' to create codes or initial categories of the data. This was an inductive process where I allowed the data to guide me in terms of different factors that I felt would allow me to reach a participant's attachment of meaning to the concept of participation.

C. Category labels or codes: Some of these commonalities were directly related to the questions that were asked during the narrative interviews, and so the categories were around where the participation took place, motivations, likes, dislikes, and many others based on each transcript.

D. Selecting data linked to each code or 'node': In Nvivo, I populated each category by highlighting and selecting phrases and sentences that were related to each node or code. I ended up with different categories, each linked to different passages from the original transcript related to the category.

E. Develop thematic poems: For each participant, I went to the list of codes and clicked so that it took me to where all the passages related to the code were. Each passage had a reference to participant names. I then started to copy some words and phrases from the list of passages and grouped them into stanzas under each category per transcript.

F. Thematic poems: The copy and paste exercise resulted in many clusters of thematically organised stanzas which I referred to as thematic poems.

Even though the themes brought in a sense of rhythm, these poems lacked flow and context, and I felt that they distorted the meaning behind participants' narratives. For this reason, I discarded the poems.

By the end of this iterative process and analysis during these two exploratory phases, I took away a sense that chronology works in terms of keeping the essence of the participant narrative. The themes were also useful in bringing some poetic sound. Even though I realised that I could not continue with both types of poems, I kept the storylines identified in Phase 1 for the next phase and started the next phase (Phase 3) with the idea of harnessing the important elements from the two phases, chronology and themes. According to Richardson (2011), some of the poetic transcriptions constitute a preparatory phase, either because they do not please the author, or they act as the author's learning curve towards what they might need to do to achieve the desired outcome.

Phase 3

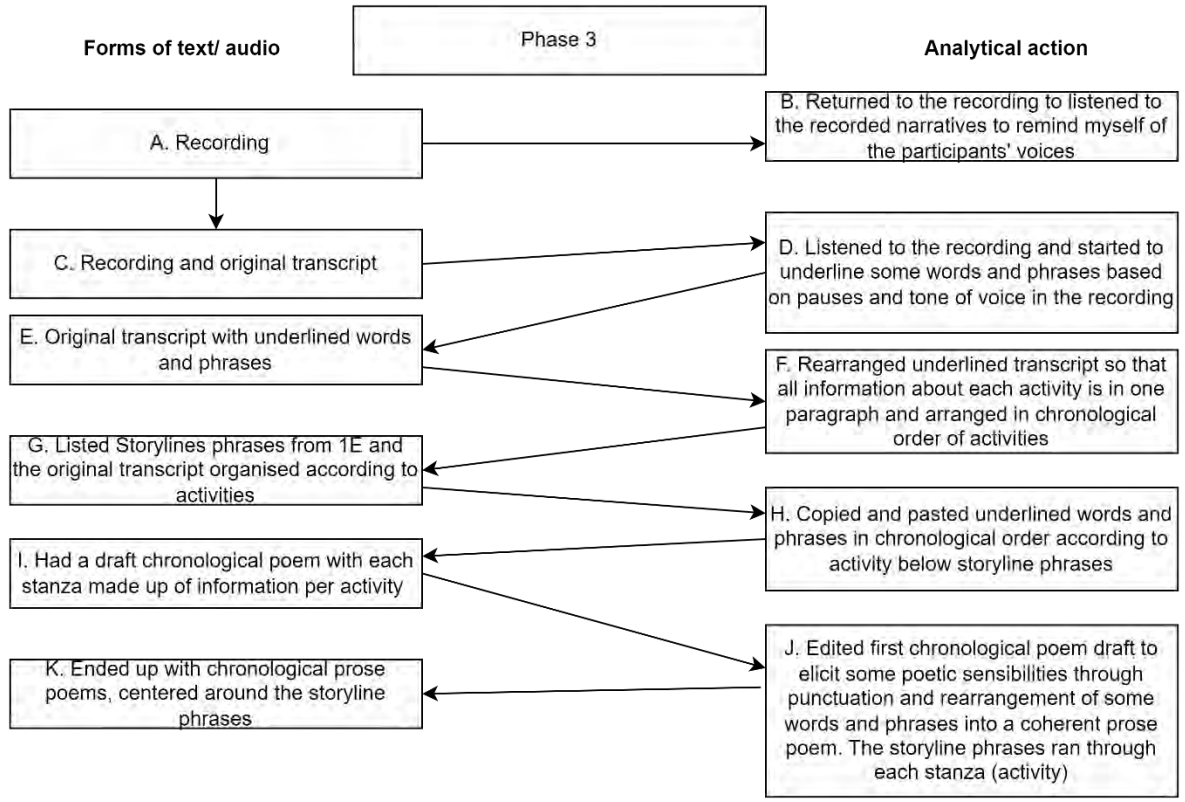


Figure 3.9: A diagram showing the steps taken during the third phase of engaging with participant narratives.

A. Recording of narrative interview: To start the third phase, I decided to return to the recorded narrative interviews per participant to remind myself of the participants' voices since a lot of time had passed since they were recorded, listened to, and transcribed.

B. Listened to recording: I listened to the recordings again several times, first listening without stopping to write anything down, but with the objective of getting a general feel for the big idea/s within each narrative.

C. Recording and original transcript: I referred to the recording and the original transcript (in a Word document, not Nvivo).

D. Listened and underlined words and phrases: I then listened to the recording a second time so that I could underline the words and phrases that I found meaningful in telling the participant's story of participation, paying attention to things like pauses, repetitions, exclamations, et cetera.

E. Original transcript with underlined words and phrases: After the listening and underlining process, I had the original transcript with underlined words and phrases, organised according to the original narrative.

F. Rearranged transcript according to activity: Since the original transcript and recording were not necessarily in chronological order, I organized the transcript so that all information about an activity was in a single paragraph with underlined words and phrases.

G. Chronologically arranged transcript and storyline headings: Rearranging paragraphs according to activity resulted in the original transcript containing underlined phrases, arranged according to activity, and placed in chronological order.

H. Developed chronological poems: I copied underlined words and phrases and pasted below the storyline headings from Phase 1.

I. Chronological poem (draft 1): Copying and pasting exercise ended with a draft of a chronologically arranged poem.

J. Edited chronological poems: I moved phrases around within each activity, paying attention to punctuation and rhythm. In addition to rhythm, I attempted to highlight what seemed to be the central message that the narrator was trying to portray through each activity. I then tried to relate this central message per activity to the storyline heading to help me create a coherent narrative.

K. Chronological prose poems: The product at this stage was a prose poem, with more rhythm and better poetic sensibilities (Appendix 3.1.3).

I returned to the chronological structure because it allowed me to show the participant's journey, which I thought could help with making causal linkages between the events in terms of how participation in previous activities fed into the others, and ultimately, how they impacted participants' engagement in the TP. However, through the long chronological poems, the themes that ran through were not as clear as I had hoped, which made it a challenge to relate them effectively to the conceptual framing and the objectives of my study. It became apparent to me that more needed to be done with the information to address the aims and objectives of the study, which led to the fourth phase.

Phase 4 (final phase)

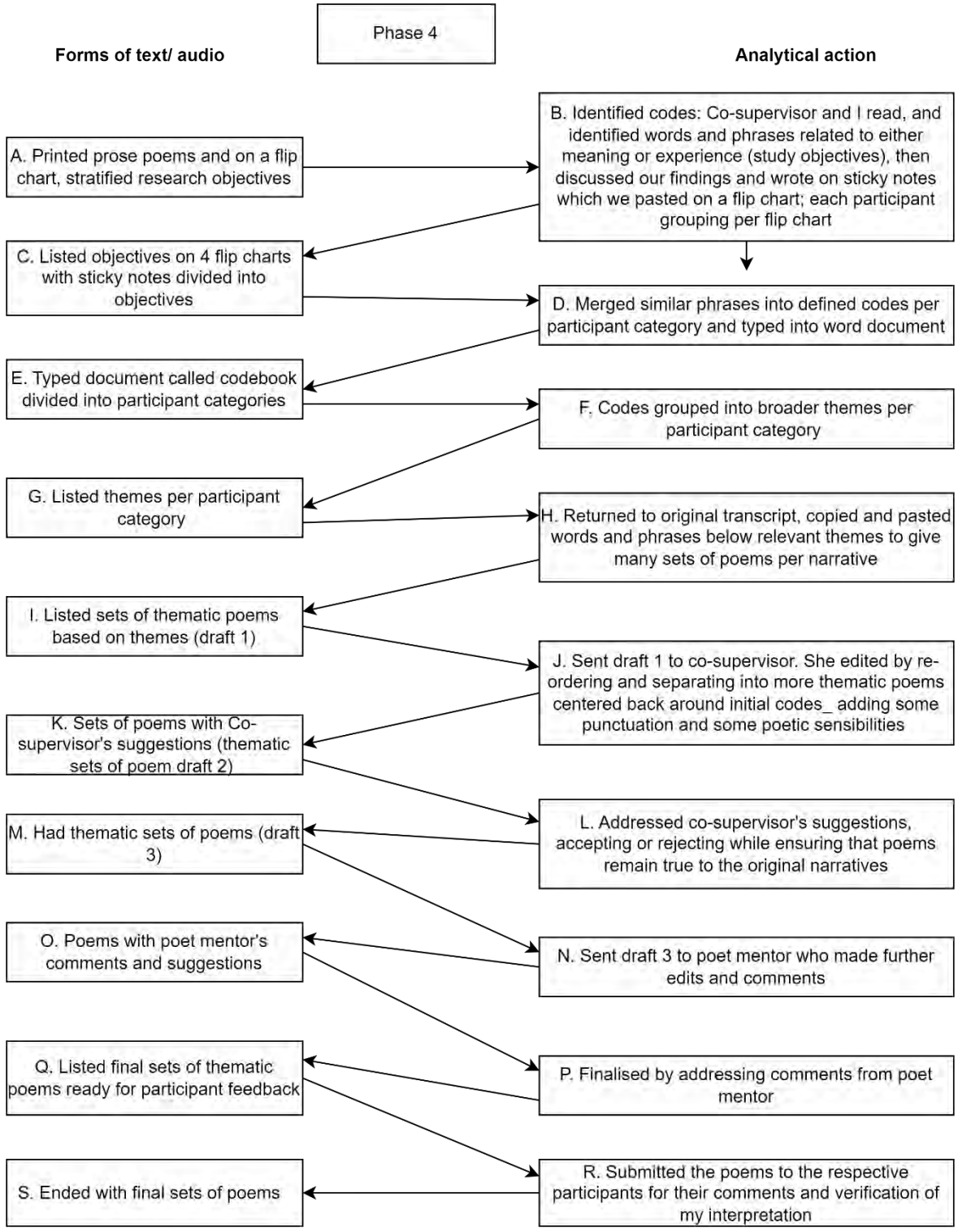


Figure 3.10:The diagram presents the step taken in the fourth phase of engaging with the participant narratives.

A. Printed prose poems: At the beginning of this phase, my co-supervisor and I had four flip charts, one for each participant group, each with the research objectives boldly written. We

used different coloured sticky notes, highlighters and markers, along with the printed prose poems from Phase 3.

B. Identified initial codes: My co-supervisor and I read through the printed prose poems, one poem at a time, looking for phrases that related to the objectives that were written on the flip chart. We both read to each other what we had identified in our respective readings and then started writing those words and phrases on sticky notes, and pasted the sticky notes under the relevant objectives. The reading was done per participant, but the words and phrases were placed onto charts related to the relevant participant categories (researchers/residents/government officials/implementing agents).

C. Flip charts with sticky notes stratified into objectives: By the end of this coding process, we had four flip charts (each representing a participant category), each with sticky notes of phrases from Phase 3 poems pasted below relevant objectives.

D. Developing finer codes: As we made decisions about each code and where to place them on the flip chart, my co-supervisor began to type the codes under the respective participants. This means that even though they were placed according to stakeholder groupings on the flip chart, the typed document distinguished the codes into the different participants. Each code had a little description or examples of phrases based on what worked best.

E. Codebook: The typed codes and their descriptions became my codebook (Appendix 3.2).

F. Developing themes: After two mornings working together developing codes, I went on to draw links between the codes from the codebook and ended up grouping some of them into broader themes. This phase was done according to stakeholder categories.

G. Broader Themes: A theme refers to a recurring unifying idea. I ended up with fewer words or phrases per participant category on a different document from the codebook (Appendix 3.1.3).

H. Developing sets of thematic poems: To develop the thematic sets of poems at this stage, I returned to the original transcripts to identify words and phrases that related to the identified themes per stakeholder category. With the themes from each participant category, I went back to the transcripts that were rearranged according to the activity described in 3G above and identified key passages within the transcript that represented particular themes. Focusing on the meaning and flow of the lines in each stanza, I started to create poems for

different themes, with minimal changes to the original text in order to preserve the speaker's voice and the original meaning of the words used. In some cases, I rearranged the order of the words from the original text, sometimes using repeated words or phrases for more intensity.

The copying and pasting process was done at individual transcript level using the themes that were developed at the participant category level. As a result, there were different numbers of poems per participant (transcript) depending on how many themes were featured out of the total per participant category.

I. Sets of poems (draft 1): I ended up with many sets of poems per participant, each related to a theme.

J. Editing and polishing: After populating the themes found in each transcript into poems, I gave them to my co-supervisor to suggest edits, such as moving certain words and phrases around while still paying attention to meaning, and other technicalities of poetry including punctuation and repetition.

As part of these suggested edits, phrases from some of the transcripts were used as titles for the poems. In this way I used a direct phrase from the transcript which was related to the broader themes. This kind of title suggestion allowed for the poems to centre around some of the participants' individual phrasing and this made the poems better at bringing out the participants' voices (Illingworth, 2022).

K. Draft 2 thematic poems: My co-supervisor then sent these edited poems with suggested edits back to me.

L. Addressed co-supervisor's comments: At this point, I paid particular attention to ensuring that meaning was not lost, but reflected the same meaning as the original transcript. I was in a better position to carry out this task since I had conducted the narrative interviews and was the only one with access to the original transcripts and recordings as part of the ethical considerations to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of my research participants.

M. Sets of thematic poems (draft 3): After checking and making the necessary changes based on the co-supervisor's suggestions, I sent the sets of poems to a poet mentor who has acted as a poetic advisor for my thesis.

N. Poet mentor made suggestions: My poet mentor made further editing suggestions.

O. Resolved suggested edits: My poet mentor sent edited sets of poems back to me.

P. Finalised poems: All the edit suggestions were left for me to either accept or reject, based on the same idea of keeping the narrative's integrity. I addressed the poet mentor's edits, to complete the analysis process.

Q. Sets of thematic poems: At this stage I was satisfied with the poems, but I did not have the final say because I had to verify with the participants.

R. Sent poems to respective participants for comments: Even though I was satisfied with the poems, I had to give the participants an opportunity to make necessary changes as the main goal was to avoid misinterpreting their voices. Many of the participants did not make any changes, but made some comments about how seeing their words in poetic form made them feel.

S. Final sets of poems: After participants commented, without many changes, the final poems were accepted and are presented in Chapter 4.

3.3 Participant feedback

Towards the end of 2022, when all the narratives had been analysed for themes and presented as poems, I held a feedback session with the Tsitsa River catchment residents; some of whom had participated in the research, and others who had not. The feedback session for the residents was held in Maclear, with a group of residents who had been available for the set date of the visit to the catchment. The residents who had participated in the narrative interviews were the people who were employed by the TP, and each of them had selected one more person from their area who was accessible to them since most of the interviews took place during the restriction of movement during the Covid-19 pandemic. I ended up with eight residents taking part in my study, made up of four (4) CLOs, one (1) citizen technician, one (1) vetiver grass monitor, and two (2) non-TP workers who were nominated by the people who worked for the TP.

For the feedback session, I called the same people hired by the TP who had participated in the narrative interviews to invite them and asked them to invite their people once again to attend. The feedback session consisted of two CLOs, three vetiver grass monitors, five citizen

technicians, and two vetiver growers. Of the eight people who took part in the narrative interviews, only three attended the feedback session on the set date in December 2022. The other 10 people who attended the feedback session were invited by the catchment coordinator for the end-of-year function.

When I commenced work again in January I tried to contact those who did not make it to the feedback session, but could only find one more, Themba; we met during the TP two-day conclusion session that we attended in King Williams Town (Qonce). Thandi unfortunately passed on during the course of my studies, while the other two, Bongile and Nkosi, had already moved on to do other things. Bongile's number was no longer going through, and his sister's number (next of kin in the TP records) was not close to him at the time of communication. Nkosi's number and email both went through, but he was unable to attend to at the time. I contacted Mr Sonwabile through Nkosi, and so when Nkosi became busy with his new career, I had no other way to get in contact with him. I have contacted Nkosi twice in 2024, to no avail.

3.4. Ethical considerations

As one of the requirements of working with human participants in engaged research, it is the researcher's responsibility to consider any concerns that participants might have with participating in the research (Patton and Cochran, 2002). Rhodes University's protocol for involving human participants was followed in drafting the ethical considerations for this study. Ethical clearance was applied for, granted for the research, and the protocol followed when conducting the study itself (Rhodes University Ethical Standards Committee, 2014).

Information to Participants

I identified myself as a Rhodes University research student and requested participants' permission to use their interview responses in a research project to complete my PhD in Water Resources Science. I told the participants that the project intended to capture their experience of participation in the TP and then asked for their permission to both record their interview and to have their picture taken. I informed participants that the interviews and photos were part of a research project that could lead not only to a PhD degree, but also to journal articles, conference presentations and other research outputs.

Participants' Privacy

Participants were assured that all the information they provided throughout the course of the research would be kept confidential between them, the researcher and the researchers' supervisors. They were also informed that all video/audio recordings (taken with their permission) would be kept in safe locations, that is, my password-protected drive, which only I would have access to, and which would be played only to verify information from the workshop. Participants were informed that all raw data would be deleted after a period of five years and that their anonymity in publications emanating from the work was ensured. Moreover, only the researcher and her supervisors would have access to participants' names and would look at the raw data.

Right to Withdraw

It was made clear that participation was completely voluntary, and that participants would sign a consent form which would include a statement about their right to withdraw from the study. However, they were informed that while they could withdraw at any time, they could not ask that all data generated during the time of their participation be deleted and not used. I read out this form to the participants before they signed it, to ensure that all clauses were covered.

Summary

This detailing of the methodology and methods leads to Chapter 4, where I show the findings of this thesis, as a result of the methodology and methods used to generate and analyse the data.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

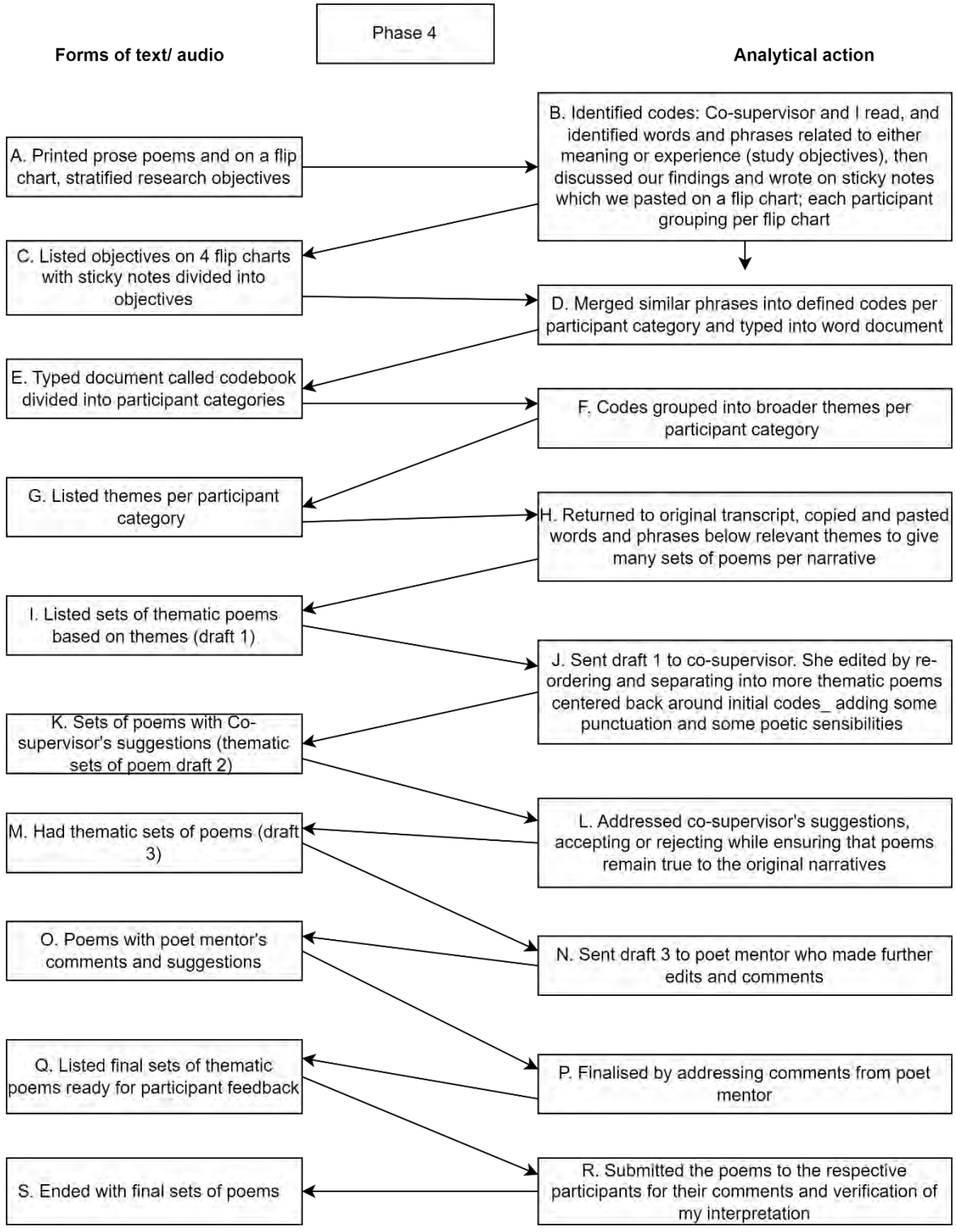
4.1. Introduction

In Chapter 4 I present the final sets of poems that were derived from the long process of collection and analysis of narrative interviews described in Chapter 3.2.2. The preparatory phases (Phases 1-3) are recorded in Appendix 3.1 (3.1.1 – 3.1.3). In the preparatory phase, each original narrative (from which the poems were derived) was numbered and the participant was assigned a pseudonym and a participant number. These pseudonyms are used throughout Chapter 4 to link participants to their poems and to the quotes from their poems. Next to each pseudonym is a bracket containing the number of poems presented from that participant's narrative. Figure 3.6 is repeated for easy reference to the Phase 4 process.

The final poems presented in this chapter are organised per participant category: residents, researchers, implementing agents, and government participants. For each category, I present the final set of poems, from each participant in the category. Each poem is followed by a short description of contextual insights, relevant to the participant and the poem. Because the poems are thematic, the reader might find that the phrases forming a single poem were taken from different activities within a participant's narrative, and so the poems presented in Chapter 4 are not necessarily chronological. The poems are also numbered for better referencing within the text, to mark which poem is referred to when giving insights.

After presenting the poems for a participant category, I identify and describe themes emerging from that category. I use quotes from the poems to demonstrate how the themes emerged and were recognised, after which the commonalities and differences in themes across the groups are presented.

The chapter ends with a section on participant feedback after reading their poems. This member-checking step was deemed important as it allowed me to verify the findings. The participants had revealed many of their perceptions, feelings and emotions during the narrative interviews, and I had tried to capture all those through the poems, but it was vital for this study to ensure that the participants were comfortable with how their narratives were transformed into the 'punchy' poem presentation.



A repeat of Figure 3.6 from Chapter 3.

4.2. Residents

Rural Tsitsa River catchment residents were invited to attend and become involved in a variety of Tsitsa project (TP) events and activities. Most attended workshop-based events, a few were employed by the TP as monitors (vetiver grass growing and monitoring), citizen technicians, eco-rangers or community liaison officers (CLOs). The vetiver grass-growing was done by some residents, while the other residents monitored the grass growers; CLOs had a central role in collaborative governance development; citizen technicians collected water from the river to be used to monitor sediment in the rivers (Bannatyne *et al*., 2017); and eco-rangers, who had recently been employed by the TP to work with the recently established grazing associations.

4.2.1. Residents' Poems

Participant 1: Bongile (4 poems)

Bongile was a CLO until 2022, when he started university. He is a young man in his early 20s, who was called upon by his community to take part in TP employment interviews, having no idea what they were about. He was appointed as a CLO for his community in 2019 and took part in TP activities such as CLO orientation, learning-words workshops, TP road shows and a TP capacity-building course. He left the TP in 2022 to focus on his university studies.

Poem 1 **I'm very curious**[1]

To me participation means taking part
or being involved
in decision-making.

[2] I decided to attend the meeting
I wanted to hear about these tractors
the money they have got
what do they do with it?
I want to ask questions.

[3] We don't have taps.
We don't have roads.
I always have hope that
maybe
he'll talk about these.

That's what makes me attend his meetings.

[4] Most of the time I meet with the ward committee
but I do meet with him, sometimes.
They feel like me being a CLO is very top
that I could help the community.
That's what makes him listen.

[5] I have FOMO, but in a good way
FEAR OF MISSING OUT
I'm curious, like, I don't want to miss out
I want to be current and updated
know what is happening in my community.

[6] I'm not allowed to attend, but I don't know why.
I always ask them, but they don't know why.

They won't allow you in
to express how you feel
or hear what they talk about.
I'm very curious
I'm part of the community
I should know—
we want to know—
where that money goes.

In stanza 1 Bongile immediately gives voice to the active or emancipatory approaches to participation discussed in Chapter 2, by highlighting his desire to actively be involved in and influence decision-making. He goes on to focus on his curiosity, and the relationship between participation and status. In stanzas 2 and 3 he explores the need to attend meetings and participate—through asking questions—in order to understand and effectively contribute to decision-making processes that might benefit his community. The curiosity that motivates his desire to understand is emphasised in stanzas 5 and 6. In both stanzas, his curiosity is underpinned by his desire to know what is happening in his community and to contribute positively. In stanza 4, Bongile's attention shifts from focusing on his listening to others, to satisfying his curiosity, asking questions, and understanding, to others listening to him—"that's what makes him [the councillor] listen." In this stanza (4), he speaks to the status he

is afforded as a CLO of the TP, and how this newfound status impacts the ways others perceive and treat him in powerful societal structures that he may not previously have had access to, as explored in stanza 6. In this stanza (6), Bongile recollects experiences where he was not afforded the status necessary to have either a presence or a voice in a space and so remains ignorant of matters concerning his community. He asserts his right as a member of the community to be informed about—to know—what is happening in his community throughout the poem.

Poem 2 **I feel more confident**

[1] I didn't understand what it meant to be a CLO
I didn't know what my duty was until I read
I didn't even know that joabase was wattle.

[2] I wasn't familiar with 'cultivate'
'uncultivated land'
but I enjoyed listening to these phrases.

[3] I'm learning—I've learned a lot—
learning and gaining experience
from the residents and the Tsitsa team.
I think I'm enjoying it.

[4] I always ask questions if I want clarity,
by asking those questions I feel like
I'm participating.

[5] Sometimes I feel like I'm being forced to participate
—they just ask, "Bongile, do you have anything to say?"

[6] Sometimes I do have something to say,
it makes me comfortable,
I feel more confident
because you can see me
you can read me.

[7] I think I misjudge myself.
Doubting if it's really correct.
It hurts when you know the answer

and someone says it
but you didn't want to put up your hand.

This poem again emphasises Bongile's interest in learning and understanding, as well as the balance between confidence and self-doubt that accompany his participation in different activities. He also refers to being "seen", which is a metaphor for visibility and how it influences his confidence and self-doubt; being seen or recognised gives him confidence that the facilitator can read him (understand him), which could be a sense of human connection that comes with face-to-face interaction. This kind of recognition is also significant for him because he often experiences feelings of self-doubt, and recognition encourages him to show that he knows some things.

In the first two stanzas of this poem, Bongile highlights his feeling or position of ignorance coming into the project – he didn't know what his role meant or entailed or how to understand the language that was being used by other members of the TP to talk about the (his) land. At the end of stanza 2, however, the curiosity we see in his first poem emerges again—he enjoys listening to phrases that he does not yet understand; they inspire his curiosity. In stanzas 3 and 4, he highlights his role as an active participant – asking questions, learning, and gaining experience from other members of the TP, including fellow residents in the area.

In the final three stanzas, Bongile speaks to his relative comfort or discomfort in spaces depending on whether or not he feels he has something to say – to contribute. When he feels able to contribute, he feels comfortable, and when he does not feel able to contribute or feels forced to contribute, he feels uncomfortable. An interesting statement is made in stanza 6, where Bongile also highlights being seen – the metaphor of visibility speaks to the desire for recognition – which relates to the link between participation and status in the first poem. In this poem, Bongile refers directly to the way participatory spaces might be experienced by individuals whose contributions are sought. They can be perceived as either offering or denying recognition to participants as agents who are able to make contributions in the space. In stanza 7 questions arise concerning the participant's own evaluation of their contributive worth, based on their own assignments of credibility to themselves in different spaces, and particularly in relation to others in the space. This reveals a tension between holding back and

contributing, where a participant may have something important to contribute to a conversation and yet not deem their contribution worthy, and so hold back from participating. Histories of coloniality and stifled agency could emerge as deficient participant contributions.

Poem 3 **I enjoyed being a leader**

[1] We were divided into groups.
To my group, I was the leader,
the one explaining what needs to happen.

[2] I'm now a CLO—an ambassador—
The CLO's role is to be an ambassador.
A link.

[3]I have to contribute
I can't just sit there quiet.
That's not participation in my context.
To me participation means to explain and ask questions.

[4] I tried asking questions before but was attacked.
I felt like
let me just go home
no one is listening to me
now, they don't even wait for you to finish talking
they just counter-attack
so just keep quiet
sit down.

[5] In the Tsitsa Project they listen
they listen to me all the time.

[6] I enjoyed being a leader—
I enjoyed being top—
but not everyone will like you,
others will vote against you.

In this poem, Bongile highlights the idea of playing certain roles, and states some of his expectations that come with those positions, especially leadership roles. This speaks into the emancipatory potential of participatory opportunities. He also suggests that participation

requires contributing to the process – explaining, asking questions, active listening and being listened to. It also touches in his view on concerns surrounding epistemic injustice – being dismissed or silenced in one's capacity as a knower or epistemic agent.

In stanza 1, Bongile introduces a new role or capacity that has not been emphasised in his earlier poems – his role in explaining things to others. In this stanza (1), as a leader, Bongile assigns himself epistemic authority and credibility, where without this role he tended to express self-doubt, despite his curiosity to learn and know what is happening around him. Then, as a CLO in stanza 2, he views himself as the TP's ambassador, playing the role of linking his community to the TP. Note that in stanza 3, he still highlights his role in asking questions of others when in a leadership position and contributing – indicating that he values reciprocity in participatory spaces. He contrasts his leadership style with his own experience of leaders who have not allowed him to engage and ask questions in participatory spaces – where he has felt silenced on a scale from being ignored to interrupted to attacked, as shown in stanza 4. This developmental potential is again an emancipatory indicator. In stanza 5, he speaks about his experience of being listened to and being called upon to speak in the TP, as mentioned in Poem 2. Stanza 6 concludes by indicating that sometimes one is voted off a position they may enjoy when others within the space are unsatisfied. Stanza 6 in a way indicates that people in a participatory space are accountable to each other in that their recognition, or lack thereof, can either give status or take status away.

Poem 4 **Since they are older**

[1] They don't listen to you
since they are all older than you
they just ignore you

"I can't hear from someone younger than me."

[2] Since they are old
they had to write
I'm the leader
I was telling them "Write these down."

[3] They said, "you are just saying it"
"just write it yourself'

They thought since I'm young
I'm the one who can write.

This poem speaks directly to epistemic injustice in terms of assignments of credibility – or, in this case, the lack thereof – as an epistemic agent based on group membership. In this poem, Bongile is silenced as a result of being younger than the other participants. In the 1st stanza, he refers to his credibility being judged based on his age (one of the credibility markers used by listeners to assign credibility). Even though he views himself as the group leader, a role that to him means being the voice of authority, he nevertheless finds himself feeling powerless because of his young age in stanzas 2 and 3. Instead of being listened to, the older people exercise their power in telling him what to do. As evident in poem 3 above, not being listened to discouraged him from wanting to participate further as he mentioned that it might be better for him to sit down and keep quiet. So, the dismissal of others based on markers such as age defeats the whole purpose of calling different people to participate.

Bongile's participatory journey is interesting, as his main motivating factor is curiosity – to know what is happening around him, in order to influence decision-making towards a positive impact in his community. While curiosity to learn motivates his participation, being silenced is highlighted by Bongile as a barrier to participation. His participation in the TP was influenced by the same curiosity and need to be recognised as it was in previous activities before the TP experience.

Participant 2: Kay (3 poems)

Kay was a community liaison officer , who first encountered the TP when she was delegated to join a TP adaptive planning process (APP) workshop in 2017. Ever since, she has been hired as a CLO, and has been involved in meetings, workshops, capacity development courses, and a road show.

Poem 1 **I create awareness**

[1] We exchanged ideas and experiences
I was equipped
and exposed to new skills
that I used to teach others

it was interesting.

[2] Being a secretary teaches you
to deal with different tempers
to handle different communities

they open your mind.

[3] The project has been a platform to gain knowledge—
the effects of veld fires on the soil
the damage these cause—
that I share with my community,
with my village leadership.

I create awareness.

Here Kay speaks about her experiences of participation in terms of learning new skills and ideas and creating awareness by sharing what she has learned with other members of her community.

In stanza 1, Kay speaks about her experiences being in spaces where she exchanged experiences with other people and gained new skills that she was able to share with other people. She speaks about how her role as a secretary gave her the skills to understand and accommodate diverse characters in the participatory space and how to be open-minded in stanza 2. Stanza 2 is about gaining the ability to adapt to different personalities who might 'open' one's 'mind' to different perspectives or points of view. Stanza 3 speaks directly to her lessons from the TP and highlights her role in sharing these lessons with and creating awareness within her community and community leadership.

Poem 2 **We are hopeful**

[1] I was delegated to represent my community—
I had no clue what it was about
it was not what I had thought
—but I was hopeful.

[2] I asked myself—
"how does this concern my community?"
"how will we benefit when we stay so far?"
"will these meetings bring change in a positive manner?"
—but I was hopeful.

[3] People came before.
Promised to restore the land.

[4] Now we see progress in some of the areas—
that is what I want,
it motivates me
—and we are hopeful.

In this poem, Kay highlights hope and visible progress in motivating resident participation in the TP, despite a general lack of understanding of the project, its goals, and how it might benefit her community.

In stanza 1, she speaks about participating in an activity without any idea what it was about. In this case, her hope motivated her to participate. Her confusion and her internal dialogue in stanza 2 are further proof that hope motivated her to stay and participate since, after being told what the activity was about, she became even more confused as to why she needed to be there when nothing had been said about her community, whom she was representing. The 3rd stanza points to previous experiences that disappointed residents, indicating that the actions of outsiders who come into a community have a bearing on how future initiatives are perceived. In this instance, disappointment with this previous group motivated her to believe that the TP would rectify their mistakes by implementing plans and promises. The 4th stanza speaks to another motivating factor, perceiving visible progress in some areas. This provided Kay with further motivation to participate and fuelled her hope for the betterment of her community.

Poem 3 **I am involved**

[1] Participation is when:
I attend a workshop
I am involved
I am part of the discussion
within the group
and we present.

[2] I live and work
in the rural areas.

When I sleep in town
it is nice for me
it shows
that I am working
unlike being in the village.

[3] I do not like
being treated like a child—
where assumptions are made
or mistakes generalised—
that is not respectful.

Kay speaks here both about what participation means to her as well as about epistemic injustice in the form of assumptions or generalisations made about other people or groups of people, which she describes as disrespectful. In stanza 1, she describes participation as being part of the discussion, which implies being able to speak – to feel as though one has a voice and can contribute to the space. In stanza 2 she also speaks about the status that came with leaving home for work and how that brought her recognition from others. Leaving the village once in a while gave her the validation she needed to prove that she indeed had a job – and was deemed to have something worthwhile to contribute – which she thinks might be hard to believe when people see you among them on a daily basis. Stanza 3 speaks about the lack of recognition that comes with making generalisations and assumptions about others and how, in her opinion, that is disrespectful. According to Kay, this lack of recognition of her epistemic capacity as an adult is a sign of disrespect. She does not want to be treated like a child as she believes children are seen as those who are not yet able to speak for themselves. In all, Kay's poems show her enjoyment of participatory spaces where knowledge and ideas are shared, which implies listening and speaking to each other, resulting in gaining new skills and knowledge that can, in turn, be shared with others as a way to raise awareness. Hope for the betterment of her community emerges as her primary motivation to participate, although recognition was also a motivating factor for her. In contrast, a lack of recognition reduced her motivation to participate as she felt disrespected in these spaces.

Participant 3: Nkosi (2 poems)

Nkosi was a community liaison officer who developed an interest in the Tsitsa Project when he attended a workshop as a community representative. He applied for an advertised position, but did not get it. Nevertheless, he continued to attend events until he got hired as a community liaison officer when the position was advertised in his area. He was also a proud member of the African National Congress (ANC).

Poem 1 **I love my job, but I also like money**

[1] I stayed in Cape Town for years without employment—
couldn't use my diploma as envisioned.
Heard there were opportunities at home.
Went back
looking for greener pastures.

[2] I researched things that could better the youth—
they all needed money,
so I put in applications.
People had hope.
But no luck.
No response.

[3] I was active in the ANC[1]—
SANCO[2] would help us.
We took the matter to national,
worked together to fight for electricity,
started strikes.
The mayor came—
Had a heated discussion.
Construction began.

But we fought amongst ourselves.

[4] When we saw white people, we were hopeful—
that after the research
they would ensure implementation

[1] ANC is the African National Congress, a political party in South Africa.

[2] SANCO is the South African National Civics Organisation, a political organisation that coordinates among existing civic organisations

help us as a community
bring opportunities
create jobs and skills—
because they get things done.
We saw progress,
people providing for their families.

[5] We were excited after a long time without work—
looking forward to being able to feed our families.
Most people left the interviews,
after realising it was educated
white people conducting them.
But the money was not much.
I expected more.
I love my job,
but I also like money.

[6] I was disappointed at how CLOs were treated—
we were not seen as important as I thought.
These challenges made me look at it differently,
but I stayed
because
I liked it,
it was in capable hands.

This poem, based on Nkosi's narrative, reveals certain tensions, perhaps most notably perceptions based on the racial identities of those entering the community as part of the TP. On the one hand, white people were seen as intimidating and unwelcoming, but on the other as facilitating progress and change, as well as exposing members of the community to opportunities. Perceptions of capability relating to racial identity also emerge here – that white people are capable, where others may not be. Another tension arising here, perhaps, is that between activity and passivity, where in a way the poem shows how Nkosi was active in his community and he failed in the youth programme, but succeeded with the electricity one. Whereas in the TP, he felt like a passive participant with no power to do much, especially with regard to his stipend.

In stanza 1, the hope of bettering himself is the driver for Nkosi's participation as he seems willing to be in any place that promises to provide him opportunities, whether it is home or away from home. Lack of financial resources or support became a barrier as shown in stanza 2, when he receives no response on his applications for funding, which shattered his hopes of bettering the youth in his community. In stanza 3, Nkosi speaks about active participation in politics, his membership in the ANC, which influenced their ability to be assisted by the South African National Civics Organisation (SANCO) and how they used that to protest and influence a major infrastructural improvement in their community. However, the successful results ended up with fighting within the community over the politics of the development. Stanza 4 speaks to the excessive credibility given to the TP based on the presence of the white researchers within the team, and the hopes and expectations that were attached to the TP as a result. In stanza 5, the credibility excess that the community awarded the white people within the TP in turn led to feelings of self-doubt and intimidation, causing people to leave the interviews. In this way, issues of race acted as a barrier to the local people's participation in the interviews. Stanza 5 also shows money as a motivating factor for Nkosi's participation in the TP, which seems to run through stanzas 1 and 4 – note the mention of phrases like 'greener pastures' in stanza 1 and 'providing for their families' in stanza 4. Even though the presence of white people seemed to drive some members of the community away from the project, it was also the reason for Nkosi's participation since he describes them as 'capable' in stanza 6. However, he was still frustrated and disappointed at the lack of recognition of his role in the TP, which led to negative perceptions of the project. Still, the hope for what the TP could achieve outweighed his need (expressed as 'love') for money, resulting in his decision to stay.

Poem 2 **I wanted to participate**

[1] It is not easy.
People are afraid.
TP and LIMA take a lead role
doing everything on their own.

[2] I realised I could help
and was delegated to attend.
I also wanted to participate
to develop skills

and influence decisions.

[3] We learnt a lot about nature—
were educated about veld fires.
People were generous with their knowledge—
helping to develop the community.

[4] People can be asked to raise their concerns but
because they are afraid
they keep quiet.

[5] Knowing what you say
won't be considered or taken forward
discourages contributing or raising a concern.

[6] But once the facilitators are gone
they have a lot of concerns to raise.
If one person raises the concern
no one supports them,
people brush things off.

[7] If there was prior interaction
with people from the project
it would make it easy to influence decisions.

[8] Tom enables us
to influence decisions the most.
He is patient
and respectful
and gentle—
helps people relax and feel able to contribute.
Even if they think what they have to say
does not matter
he encourages people
to participate.

Again, Nkosi speaks about participation here in terms of influencing decisions, but emphasises how facilitators can either enable or disable this dynamic.

In stanza 1, Nkosi describes the TP space as scary owing to TP (researchers and government) and LIMA Rural Development Foundation (implementing agents) coming into the community with pre-defined goals and objectives, leaving no room for the community to contribute at this initial stage of the process. In stanza 2, he speaks about being delegated to represent his community, feeling that he could learn new skills, help make a contribution and influence decisions. In stanza 3, he describes his experience in the TP of learning from people who he described as generous with their knowledge and interested in developing his community. In stanzas 4 and 5, he refers to another factor that scares participants in a participatory space even when they are invited to speak, knowing (or believing) that their input will be ignored. Ignoring other people's inputs is described here as silencing participants as it discourages them from making further contributions. The stanzas (4 and 5) show that there is a sense that even though the intention is to hear from other people, those who invite others tend to hold on to the decision-making power over what goes into the final outcome, which is the instrumental approach to participation.

Stanza 6 shows that even though some issues may not be raised out of fear of being ignored by the facilitators, those issues do not necessarily disappear, but end up being raised in platforms where they do not serve much purpose other than to vent. He also speaks about a perceived lack of support from other participants as a barrier to residents' raising issues. The point about support here shows that participants sometimes need moral support from their peers in order to feel comfortable enough to speak or raise issues that might be considered sensitive.

In stanza 7, he goes back to the issues raised in stanza 1, but this time suggests a solution to the challenge of facilitators coming into the community with pre-conceived ideas. He suggests that prior interaction between the facilitators and the community on how to run activities in a way that will encourage residents to contribute could help to assuage this concern. Nkosi shows that he understands his role as an expert when it comes to the needs of his community, and that the researchers and implementing agents need to listen to them as community representatives in order to improve their interactions with the community. In stanza 8, he describes how Tom, one of the facilitators, encourages them to contribute even when they have feelings of self-doubt. He mentions Tom's patience, respect and gentleness as key

factors that encouraged his community members to speak up in participatory spaces. The role of the facilitators in either enabling or inhibiting participation is emphasised throughout.

In all, Nkosi, as a young man, is motivated to participate when there is money to allow him to help his family, and when he believes he is able to influence decisions that could better his community. He also brought up some race issues that were both enabling and inhibiting for his community, and the role of facilitators in either inhibiting or enabling participation (human connection).

Participant 4: Nolu (4 poems)

Nolu was a citizen technician. She first encountered the Tsitsa Project in 2015 when she was hired in that position. She attended many workshops and meetings related to the Tsitsa Project and was part of an association that began as a venture to grow and sell vetiver grass in her village.

Poem 1 **It gave me confidence**

[1]They elected the executive committee
And I was nominated

[2]I was shocked to hear this
First, I doubted myself

[3]I was not confident I could do the job
I even wanted to stop going to church

[4]Being elected means there is something I can contribute.
I was encouraged by other church members

[5]I had experience being a secretary at church
I was able to do the job quite easily

[6]I gained experience. We were respected.
And treated kindly by other members.

[7]It gave me confidence—standing in front of people
and talking, working, with different people.

I trust myself to do what I need to do as a secretary.

In this poem Nolu speaks to the recognition she was afforded by members of her community and how that influenced her contribution in the TP. Insofar as this was the case, she speaks about both doubt and confidence.

Stanza 1 speaks about participation as being nominated and elected into a role by others. In stanzas 2 and 3 she battles with feelings of self-doubt and low confidence, to a point that she considers quitting. This shows how significant it is for her to feel confident when participating. In stanza 4 she feels encouraged by others in the space, and realises that her selection was not merely random, but a recognition of her abilities. Stanzas 5 to 7 highlight how that one selection or experience influenced the rest of her interactions in other spaces, including finding it easy to do other similar tasks. Learning took place, and on top of gaining experience, she also gained the confidence to speak publicly. In short, Nolu describes respect and support as enablers of her participation.

Poem 2 **I have grown**

[1] We attended workshops
and had to explain what we do—
Because I had experience standing in front of people at church,
It was much easier for me to do so in the Tsitsa Project.

[2] The only challenge was doing this in front of white people.
But I was able to overcome that fear.

[3] I gained knowledge. I have grown.
I never used to notice the river,
but now I am interested in what happens in the river.
There is a lot I have gained
like talking and working well with people.

[4] For me, participating means
I will gain something new.

In this poem, Nolu speaks about learning from experience and growing as a result. She describes how previous experiences influenced her TP experiences for the better. Throughout the poem she emphasizes how gaining skills and knowledge both challenge her and enable her personal growth. In stanza 1, she speaks about how her experience as a church secretary equipped her with the skills to participate more easily within the TP space, especially the

ability to speak in front of many people. In stanza 3 she refers to how gaining knowledge and skills led to her general growth, and drove her to develop new interests, such as wanting to know more about what happens in the river. Again in stanza 4, she reiterates the meaning of participation for her as "the promise to gain something new". However, in stanza 2, she also speaks to the challenge presented by multiracial participatory spaces, suggesting that she used to feel too intimidated to speak in front of white people but later overcame that fear.

Poem 3 **I was not comfortable**

[1] Someone interrupting you
because they don't agree with what you're saying
I really don't like when that happens
I prefer that a person can speak and finish
before someone else can speak.

[2] Speaking English
it was not easy
it was the first time working
with English-speaking people;

[3] it was frustrating at first,
I was not comfortable
speaking English—
I cannot express myself fully—
I wanted to give up and quit

I prefer to speak my home language.

[4] But after receiving my stipend
and doing some work
I decided to keep at it
and see where it takes me.

This poem highlights some of Nolu's frustrations surrounding participation, focusing especially on being interrupted while speaking or silenced, as well as language as a barrier to participation. Here she describes something common among residents' narratives (as well as among other individuals in other participant groups)—that is, concerns surrounding speaking English. In stanza 1, Nolu describes being interrupted when speaking as a barrier to

participation in any participatory space. In contrast, she indicates a preference for mutual respect in these spaces. In stanza 2, Nolu describes her struggle to use the English language when having to engage with English speakers. She suggests that because it was her first time "working with English speaking people" she found it hard to express herself – possibly pointing again to the intimidation factor mentioned earlier. Her frustrations are reiterated in stanza 3, where she speaks about nearly quitting because she did not feel as though she could fully express herself. In stanza 4, she ends by stating that while she prefers to speak in her home language, her motivation to stay was the stipend she received.

Poem 4 **I really like that**

[1] Attending the Tsitsa workshops,
what I liked most is the respect we are given—
even as elderly women.

[2] We are comfortable in the places we sleep
and the food we eat is nice.
You feel important.

[3] If you mention you're not feeling well,
people check on you and take care of you.
We were treated with respect and care.

[4]For me,
I am thinking—
am I able to contribute?

[5]Being called to participate in something
to me means there is something that people see
in me that I can contribute.

I really like that.

In this poem, Nolu speaks about factors that she found to enable participation in her experience. Among these were respect, acknowledgement, and care from others within the space, as well as recognition of her ability to contribute in her capacity as a knower.

In stanza 1, Nolu speaks about being motivated to take part in the TP because of the recognition and respect that participants were afforded at their advanced age. Age is a factor

here that Nolu felt they were recognised for. She continues in stanzas 2 and 3 to speak about feeling important as a result of being provided with comfortable accommodation and good food, and shown respect and care, all of which proved to be incentives that kept her going. Stanzas 4 and 5 speak about being able to contribute in a participatory process, and being recognised for the ability to make this contribution by others in the space. Recognition is highlighted as especially important for her in this poem.

In all, Nolu's story of participation seems to be centred around recognition and respect, and the confidence that comes with being recognised as a credible person who has an important contribution to make to the participatory space. She also highlights learning from different experiences and using those lessons to engage in other spaces like the TP. Her main concerns within the TP were related to language, which she suggests she overcame once she got used to the environment and the people involved in the project.

Participant 5: Thandi (3 poems)

Thandi is one of the residents who grows vetiver grass for an income, and has been part of the TP workshops and meetings since 2017. Within the TP, she is mainly associated with the Livelihoods and Ecosystem Services community of practice.

Poem 1 **I am recognised**

[1]To participate means I am recognised
as someone who can make a valuable contribution,
and as an active person.

[2] I was very active in the community;
elected to be a secretary of the branch.
I was part of the women's league,
as the treasurer;
volunteering for the branch.
The party would see that I was dedicated;
and I'd become a ward committee member.

[3] I started to make some money,
and saw a difference in my life.
I could now contribute towards my family's needs,
and help my husband.

Like other residents, Thandi defines participation in this poem as being actively involved and making valuable contributions to a process. Also akin to other residents, she highlights the role of money, and thereby the ability to support her husband and family, as motivating her participation.

Just like Nolu, in stanza 1, Thandi refers to the recognition of her valuable contribution as an important factor in what participation means for her. She also suggests that being active in the process leads to this recognition. In stanza 2, she names some of the roles she has played that showed that she was recognised, some of which she was elected to, while she volunteered for others. She hoped that her dedication would lead to her goal of becoming a ward committee member, which was a paid position that she wanted. In stanza 3, she speaks about making money and being able to contribute to her family's income as an incentive that kept her in the TP. Ultimately, this poem suggests that Thandi's motivation to participate is the recognition, and betterment of herself and her family.

Poem 2 **I like to learn**

[1] I like to learn, and
in the project workshops,
I gained a lot of knowledge,
that is why I always attended.

[2] I was taught how to work
with local people;
to find and listen
to their needs.

Here Thandi speaks about her enjoyment of learning as motivation to participate in the TP – learning, gaining knowledge, and understanding. She highlights this motivation in stanza 1. Then in stanza 2, she speaks about being taught to work with others, and highlights the importance of learning to identify peoples' needs through listening to them. She suggests that listening is necessary for learning.

Poem 3 **I wish they would wait**

One thing that my parents taught me is respect
which I apply in my family.
When I am speaking—
maybe saying something that isn't correct—
and someone is talking over me

not listening to what I am saying
That is what I do not like most.
I wish they would wait for me
and correct me after.

Again, akin to other residents, Thandi emphasises respect for speakers when they are speaking in this poem. She begins by stating that her family's value of respect guides her interactions with others, including her family. She highlights the value of respect in enabling participation in contrast to practices that silence, interrupt, or correct speakers before they are finished speaking – practices that inhibit participation. In certain cases, this lack of respect and recognition contributes to environments in which epistemic injustice occurs. She emphasises the importance of waiting for speakers to express themselves fully before interrupting or correcting them.

Participant 6: Mr Banele (2 poems)

Mr[3] Banele first encountered the Tsitsa Project when he attended a community gathering where they were introduced to both the vetiver grass and the possibility of starting a small community enterprise. He played a leading role in the vetiver grass-growing business that his community started with the guidance of the TP's Livelihoods Community of Practice (CoP).

Poem 1 **We were happy**

[1]The Tsitsa project was introduced
as a project that will give us water[4].

[2] They told us we can sell the grass
That it could be used to rehabilitate dongas
That we would get pipes to water it.

I was nominated to lead this project

[3] They told us that the dam will be built
we will get some jobs

[3] Notice how his name has 'Mr', since I never personally interacted with him before conducting an interview with him, I cannot help but think of him a bit more formally than the others who I had met before.
[4] It should be noted that this was a huge misconception as the Tsitsa Project was never about water delivery – it was aimed only at land restoration to make the most of water and prevent erosion … linked to better livelihoods.

we can sell our things
we were happy with that.

Once again, Mr Banele reiterates the hope for positive change and progress, and the desire to have a job, as enabling participation. These themes were pertinent in this participant category as motivating factors for participation. In Stanzas 1 and 3, the association of the TP as a restoration project with the proposed dam construction became the motivating factor for Mr Banele's participation in the TP. These initiatives for him held the promise to cure the water shortages within his area and the high unemployment rates, as mentioned in the context section of Chapter 1 in this thesis. In stanza 2, he also mentions looking forward to growing grass that could both be sold for money and used to rehabilitate their land.

Poem 2 **I am needed**

[1]I attend community meetings to listen
and help where I am needed

[2]I am called upon when there is trouble
when they need someone to resolve a conflict

[3]I like seeing the community working together
supporting each other and communicating

[4]helping out in the community is participating
I help by contributing my money

I am someone who likes to contribute in that manner

[5]I believe in God
you have to be close to God to live

[6]When there is something said that I do not believe in
that is when I don't participate or contribute.

In this poem, Mr Banele speaks about his status in the community. From being needed in stanza 1, to being called upon to resolve conflicts in stanza 2, all seem to be duties of a powerful person. To validate his powerful position in a community like his, he also speaks

about giving people money (stanza 3), a sign that he may have more resources than many of his community members who were described as mostly poor in the context of this thesis. Taking part in community activities in these ways allows him to maintain his status. Stanzas 5 and 6 show the role of his religion in influencing where he participates and where he does not. If he is part of the dominant religion of Christianity, then his mentioning it here could indicate that it also contributed to his status.

Participant 7: Mr Sonwabile (2 poems)

Mr[5] Sonwabile is an elderly member of his community who is retired from the mines. He is one of the participants of this study who did not work for the TP but took part in some of its activities.

Poem 1 **I guided them**

[1] I trained new miners.
We contributed money and started a brick-making company,
to earn some extra money;
we also employed others, to make some money.
We were not just workers; we had shares.

[2] I was a caretaker for years,
then part of the SGB
I have also been part of the schools being built in this area;
even now,
I am part of the planning of a new school currently being built.

[3] The first time Rhodes students came to this area,
they came to me.
I took them to the headman.
I guided them through the forest.

Here Mr Sonwabile speaks about past experiences of participation – highlighting, again, the role of status in motivating participation. He was also motivated to help others and share his knowledge.

[5] Again, Mr is used for the same reason as above, i.e., non-familiarity prior to the interview interaction.

In stanza 1, he shares skills with new miners, and comes together with others to start a business, where money was the motivating factor. He also shares the benefits with others by employing other people. Having shares gave him and his partners status as is evident in the statement: "*We were not just workers; we had shares"*. He has played different roles to support his community in stanza 2. In stanza 3, he mentions how he helped Rhodes University students who came to his area. In all three stanzas of this poem he is a leader, looked to and approached for guidance and assistance. This speaks about how some participants come with confidence and self-worth from their life experience – he comes in more confidently than the younger inexperienced participants.

Poem 2 **I am motivated**

[1] Even after retirement,
I like that I could still use the knowledge I had gained
to share with people here in the village,
so they could also have some skills.

[2] I like that they bring students to the area;
Students arrive almost every year,
they help us remember or talk about things;
There were a lot of them; some were white.

[3] They made us understand how water flows
down the mountain into the Tsitsa River,
I expected to gain some knowledge,
to add to what I already know;
that is what I like and received; it was what I wanted.

[4]Being called to participate means that people value me and my contribution;
if that person wants people to participate,
it means they like people;
I am also motivated to participate when someone is easy to reach or ask questions.
I also like talking to the people in the community.

In stanza 1, Mr Sonwabile shows humility when he shares his skills with people of his village in order to empower them. This idea of gaining knowledge and skills, then sharing with their

community seems to flow across the resident participants' narratives. In stanza 2, he speaks about reflecting with the students on things that they already knew in addition to the new things that they learned. He had expected to learn more from the outsiders to add to what he already knew. This shows that he views himself as a credible epistemic agent. But raising the issue of race in stanza 2 could either be a sign of assigning whites higher credibility than non-whites, or a sign of status for him having interacted with them. Stanza 4 discusses recognition, that he is selected to participate owing to the recognition of his value and contribution to the participatory space. He is encouraged to participate when the facilitator is open and easy to talk to. The theme in this stanza is his ability to speak and be heard (or, put differently, to be recognised).

Again, in this older male participant we see a focus on status, exemplified in the focus on contributing monetarily and being needed for guidance by the larger community (rather than only one's family, for example). Like Mr Banele, there is no mention of feeling intimidated at any point as is the case with the other younger residents, showing that there is a certain epistemic authority that seems to come with age.

Participant 8: Themba (4 poems)

Themba is a community liaison officer. He first encountered the TP when he applied for the position and was invited for an interview. He got the job and has been a part of the project ever since, participating in workshops, training, and the road show.

Poem 1 **a better place**

[1] I studied in the school here (in the village),
with the intention to become someone some day

[2] I left (changed) jobs because a friend told me:
"there is a place that is better than the one you're in, come and apply"

[3] We worked with forests and dongas
I thought
a contract would come,
then work would commence.

In this short poem, Themba speaks about hope for the future, and for positive change as a driver for what he chooses to participate in. From the beginning, his participation was

intended to lead to his betterment, as is evident in stanza 1. In stanza 2, as he chooses where to work, it is still about looking for something better. Stanza 3 is about what he expected the TP to be about before gaining enough information.

Poem 2 **Besides these challenges, there are many things that I learned.**

[1] When the Tsitsa Project came,
I was not sure what it was about.
I used to think it was about dongas, soil and trees
only.

[2] There were those workshops
which taught us the systems it uses
I did not have a proper understanding at first
but as I followed it, I realised
that it does those things
but it depends on funding.
Those who went to school, they understand, but
the majority of the community has problems
and don't want to talk about the project.

[3] Besides these challenges, there are many things that I learned.
The amount of knowledge I got
apart from formal education
was a lot because the project is very broad.
It's not just about forests and dongas,
there is more to it,
including partners.
The Tsitsa project is different,
it's a process
it deals with issues that are real for this community.

[4] When you take part
you learn something new
and you teach other people.
It's about gaining knowledge
just being there, even if you don't talk
just listen
just be aware of what is happening in your surroundings.

[5] Sometimes it is about numbers
increasing credibility—

if we get a certain number of signatures—
but do not just vote without knowing the details,
if people had knowledge,
they would make better choices.

[6] Talking to each other and showing up for each other—
if I had not gone there
or we did not talk to each other
there wouldn't have been a change.

In this poem, Themba speaks about feeling empowered as a result of gaining knowledge and experience, as well as about making a positive contribution through his participation. In stanza 1, he reflects on his confusion when he first entered the TP space and what his assumptions were. In stanza 2, he talks about learning and understanding what the TP was about and how that understanding enabled him to participate. He brings in education as a factor in how easily people understood the TP's way of working; he felt that the more educated members of his community gained this understanding faster than those who did not have formal education. He encountered some challenges due to the lack of understanding by the majority of the community, but reiterates in stanza 3 how understanding the TP's way of operating enabled him to adapt his initial perceptions. In stanza 4, he continues to emphasise that participation in his opinion is about gaining knowledge, which requires listening to what is being said, even if you do not speak. In a sense, participation for him is more about listening than speaking – although this is complicated in stanza 6 where he indicates that had they not spoken to one another, understanding, and, subsequently, change would not have taken place.

In stanza 5, he alludes to the concern with tokenistic or instrumental approaches to participation when he refers to participation sometimes being a matter of increasing numbers for voting purposes. Despite this, he suggests that, even in the event of a tokenistic approach to participation, having enough information and understanding is essential for informed decision-making. He suggests that it is often important for those representing the community to consult with their peers informally, as this is another way to get more information to guide effective decision-making.

Poem 3 That empowered me

[1] I showed excellence in sports,
especially soccer,
went to finish my studies in Gauteng,
even there I showed excellence,
I was taken by a professional team into their academy.

[2] I was taken to a private school by white people to complete my matric;
Yoh! I had issues when I got there—
English was something I could only write
but it placed me in a better position to understand
and had an impact on my ability to speak.
that empowered me to even stand up
for myself,
and made me become someone—
I got jobs that placed me close to white people.

[3] I didn't take a year doing that job—
was made a leader
managed to show excellence
got selected as part of a delegate
got selected when others were left behind.

[4] Where I worked as a supervisor, I took part in meetings
I was not embarrassed if they turned me down
that is how we learn

[5] I stayed in security
I had an interest to grow
Security is known for opening gates and registering names

[6] On my journey what I realised is
they empower their workers
they train you and empower you
they get you into courses

[7] Even though I was lower in terms of work positions,
things like that empowered me
and encouraged me even more.
People had a desire for me
to thrive, encouraging me
to apply for other positions—
"why don't you explore other opportunities?"
That empowered me.

Here again, Themba highlights the centrality of being empowered by his understanding of participation. The empowerment he describes comes in two forms: gaining new knowledge and skills on the one hand, and gaining social status associated with higher credibility on the other. In stanza 1, Themba speaks about showing excellence in performing, and how that led to recognition that led to better opportunities. In stanza 2, one of these opportunities landed him in a challenging place where he struggled to speak English. However, in the same stanza, he managed to overcome the language challenge and felt empowered to speak up. He raises the issue of race and implicitly assigns white people a level of credibility based on their race, which gives him status for being able to communicate with them easily. Again, he acquired recognition within quite a short period of starting a new job owing to his performance, while others were left behind. This seems similar to Thandi's case; that is, being active in order to be seen or recognised by superiors who have the power to promote you.

In stanza 4, he speaks about learning from his ideas being turned down instead of being embarrassed by them. In Themba's case – unlike Bongile, Nolu and Thandi – ideas being dismissed does not silence him, but is turned into a learning experience. This reaction could be due to having more outside exposure, which has made him confident in himself. In stanzas 5 and 6, he speaks about working in security for personal and professional growth since he learned that security was not limited to 'opening gates and registering names'. In these stanzas, learning is also a huge factor in Themba's participation when he mentions training and how that empowered him. In stanza 7, he reiterates the fact that he felt empowered as a result of being in meetings with his seniors at work and having people in his life rooting for him to succeed; having the support of the people around him is deemed encouraging and empowering at the same time.

Poem 4 **I swear, it's very painful**

[1] I had to leave sports
to finish my studies
I went to college
but left due to money
I left during a strike
my life was in danger
got injured
felt uncomfortable
I decided to quit
maths and science

skills I didn't master
I couldn't afford to do courses
due to parental obligations.

[2] That the Tsitsa Project is a process;
when it gets there
that is where it troubles me
the most until today
that is the most difficult part
when you address the people
they don't care about that
all they want to know is how
they were left behind
I swear, it's very painful.

[3] I went to the headman
for permission
he said
"go ahead, but they'll eat you alive."
They chased me around
I swear and
many hurtful words were said
it brings me problems because
there is nothing tangible
it is really hard
it does not give me power

[4] if you knew people from this area
it's elderly people,
something being said by a child
they would hardly listen to it
But I could try if
there was something tangible
I am afraid to go and speak there
what will I say?
It shouldn't have been referred to
as a project
people here hear
'project'
they think of employment

[5] I hated it
you see

you people come from university
having master's and stuff
I had a geography teacher
He only spoke English
not just simple English
they called him American
he didn't consider
we lived in rural areas,
and were not used to English
Tsitsa project took me back
to that thing that challenged me
in school

[6] If you take a child from here, and
place them in a town school
there is a big difference
you can blame our education
which was the worst one
some of them studied in Mthatha college
then stay in the village
where they never got exposed
to people who speak English
it affected their confidence to speak.
that is the disadvantage we have.

Themba expresses his frustrations working in the TP – and mediating between the TP and his community – in this poem. He focuses particularly on language and the impact of levels of education in the rural areas on people's ability to understand the work and aims of the TP.

In the first stanza, the barriers to his participation are a lack of financial resources to finish college and not having enough to enrol in courses owing to parental obligations, as well as quitting two jobs owing to feeling unsafe ("during a strike… got injured"). In the same stanza, he speaks about a lack of skills to take part in other jobs. In stanza 2, he voices his TP experiences and challenges, one of them being his inability to get through to his community in explaining why the TP had not hired anyone yet except him. His inability to persuade them to understand how the TP operated made him vulnerable. In the 3rd stanza, he gives an example of his headman, who was fully aware of the negative perceptions that his community had towards the TP, warning him against addressing the community. The theme of this poem

is the difficulty of facing an unsatisfied community due to their lack of information and clarity about what the participatory space is about, with no tangible results to point to when people asked. This made him feel powerless and vulnerable to their attacks and insults.

In the 4th stanza, unlike Bongile who gained status and a voice in some relevant places due to his role in the TP, Themba experienced the opposite. His position in the TP took away his voice and power. Part of the reason for this silencing was his young age, which rendered him a non-credible epistemic agent in the community, but the lack of tangible results by the TP made matters worse. Again, safety … "I am afraid to go and speak." Another challenge that comes up in stanza 4 is the issue of 'packaging' or labelling the message and the expectations it raises, such as the TP being referred to as a 'project' raising expectations of employment.

Stanza 5 brings in language as another factor that influences people's ability to participate. First, he reflects on his teacher who spoke hard English that, as a student from the rural areas, he did not understand. This teacher did not consider their context. The use of the English language in the TP activities reminded him of this sad part of his life, and he blames the rural context for their lack of confidence to speak English, even though some of them are actually educated and know the language. The rural areas, in contrast to urban schools, are characterised by poor education systems that do not expose students to practising their English-speaking skills. And so, Themba's frustration is directed not so much towards the TP's use of the language, but to the poor education system that did not equip them to express themselves. In this way, unlike the others who nearly quit engaging with the TP owing to the language barrier, Themba's narrative gives a context to why language, even for those with the knowledge to speak English, nearly became a barrier to participation.

In all, Themba's story centres around starting with hope and expectations about the participatory space, and then listening and learning about the space, and adapting his initial expectations, especially in relation to the TP. Even though recognition was positively associated with participating when he had shown excellence, his recognition (selection) as the only member of his community hired by the TP held negative associations when members of his community insulted him and refused to cooperate with him on TP-related matters.

4.2.2. Residents' themes

This section details the themes that emerged in Phase 4, F & G (Figure 3.6, Section 3.2.2, page 30) of the data analysis process, and explores the residents' framing of participation. I consider what participation means to them, and examine their experiences of participation both within and beyond the TP. The central themes are: 1) hope and frustration; 2) human connection; 3) learning and understanding: gaining knowledge and feeling empowered to share; 4) recognition versus tokenism, and 5) other enablers and/or inhibitors of participation, such as age, language, money, and race.

1. Hope and frustration

One of the more dominant themes emerging from the residents' poems is hope, occurring in all eight resident participants' narratives: particularly hope for a better future for themselves and their community. Hope emerged as a major motivator for participation in this stakeholder category – hope that activities participated in would lead to positive changes in their lives, at both the individual and community levels. For instance, at the community level, Bongile attended councillor's meetings with the hope of getting taps installed in his village, and Mr Sonwabile attended village events hoping to help his community while maintaining his status. When the TP was introduced, hope also emerged in relation to the restoration of the land and the potential to influence decision-making. Importantly, the residents spoke about earlier disappointments resulting from outsiders coming into the community and making, but failing to fulfil, their promises. However, they nevertheless remained hopeful that the TP would fulfil its promises. In Kay's words:

> *"People came before.*
> *Promised to restore the land.*
>
> *Now we see progress in some of the areas.*
> *That is what I want.*
> *It motivates me,*
> *and we are hopeful."*

This said, previous organisations' presence and work in the community emerged as informing how subsequent initiatives, like the TP, were perceived by members of the community, as

well as whether and how the community chose to participate or interact with the ongoing initiatives.

At an individual level for instance, Thandi became an active member of her political party with the hope of being recognised and selected for a paying position (ward committee member) for the betterment of her family, while Themba hoped that going to school would make him a successful person someday, "*become 'someone' someday*", and he made it (became a supervisor in various companies that he worked for). Some participants spoke about leaving their homes hoping for greater opportunities, educational or job-related opportunities elsewhere, with which to better themselves and support their families, while others spoke about returning home "*looking for greener pastures*." However, in other instances, the participants experienced a number of frustrations when trying to achieve their goals. For instance, a lack of financial support for a youth development project was mentioned by Nkosi:

> *"I researched things that could better the youth.*
> *They all needed money,*
> *so I put in applications.*
> *People had hope.*
> *But no luck.*
> *No response."*

Another frustration related to the context itself. Many people in the area, for instance, describe themselves as disadvantaged in comparison to those who live closer to better services. In Themba's words:

> *"If you take a child from here, and*
> *place them in a town school*
> *there is a big difference*
> *you can blame our education*
> *which was the worst one*
> *some of them studied in Mthatha college*
> *then stay in the village*
> *where they never got exposed*
> *to people who speak English*
> *it affected their confidence to speak*
> *that is the disadvantage we have."*

Themba suggests that lacking access to a good education – and, in this case, practising English – inhibits people's confidence and prevents them from participating, which is experienced as a significant frustration.

Another major frustration expressed by resident participants arose from a disjunct between participants' expectations and what they perceived to be reality. For instance, most of the participants were hopeful that the TP would do the physical work of restoring the land and fulfil their hope of gaining job opportunities, but were disappointed to learn that it was mainly a research project with little physical work on the ground. In addition, residents expressed frustration in cases where certain people were picked, or selected, to participate, while others were left behind. For example, in Themba's words:

> *"that is where it troubles me*
> *the most until today*
> *that is the most difficult part*
> *when you address the people*
> *they don't care about that*
> *all they want to know is how*
> *they were left behind*
> *I swear, it's very painful"*

Themba explains that the TP's packaging as a 'project' became a source of conflict for the community because the very word 'project' is associated with employment by members of the community. In his words:

> *"I am afraid to go and speak there*
> *what will I say?*
> *It shouldn't have been referred to*
> *as a project*
> *people here hear*
> *'project'*
> *they think of employment."*

Frustrations such as these reveal the importance of understanding the context one is moving into and packaging introductions in such a way that most of the community clearly understands what the initiative can and cannot achieve. Importantly, they also reveal how unsafe it may sometimes become for the selected few when the larger community is confused about the intentions of an initiative. To draw on Themba's words once again:

"I went to the headman
for permission
he said
"go ahead, but they'll eat you alive."
They chased me around
I swear and
many hurtful words were said

… it brings me problems because
there is nothing tangible
it is really hard
it does not give me power"

Perhaps one of the more significant frustrations emerging from this stakeholder category in relation to their experiences of participation, particularly given my interest in epistemic (in)justice, is the experience of feeling silenced or dismissed in the participatory space. "*I do not like it when they speak over me"* was a common phrase in these narratives, typically drawn on when participants were asked what they disliked in their experiences of participation. Nolu, for instance, expressed this frustration:

"Someone interrupting you
because they don't agree with what you're saying;
I really don't like when that happens.
I prefer that a person can speak and finish
before someone else can speak.

Thandi, in her poem, 'I wish they would wait' also clearly expressed this frustration when she said:

"When I am speaking -
maybe saying something that isn't correct -
and someone is talking over me,
not listening to what I am saying…
That is what I do not like most.
I wish they would wait for me,
and correct me after."

Similarly, Bongile described his experience:

"I tried asking questions before
but was attacked.
I felt like, let me just go home,

no one is listening to me.
Now they don't even wait
for you to finish talking
they just counter-attack,
so I just keep quiet,
sit down."

In each of these stanzas, the residents are expressing frustration with being interrupted, silenced, dismissed, not heard, or attacked when attempting to contribute to the conversation. While this was experienced by some of the resident-participants in contexts other than the TP, I have flagged it here because of its potential to influence how they engaged within the TP space.

2. Human connection

Resident participants felt that an enabling environment allowed them to achieve some of their participation goals, such as the facilitator creating an inviting space and genuinely asking for their input. For instance, Nkosi spoke highly about Tom's facilitation of participatory spaces. In his words:

"Tom enables us
to influence decisions the most.
He is patient
and respectful
and gentle.
He helps people relax and feel able to contribute.
Even if they think what they have to say
does not matter,
he encourages people
to participate…
to influence decisions."

Nkosi's remark about influencing decisions speaks to the idea of epistemic justice in that the resident participants felt like they could express themselves and know that their epistemic contributions were considered credible enough to influence decisions. In some way, the creation of a conducive environment by the facilitator could contribute towards correcting instances of tokenistic behaviour that left the participants feeling like their input was not used.

Resident participants discussed various factors that had an impact on whether they got what they hoped for, including context, support and even safety. For instance, Nkosi and his community fought quite fiercely to get electricity and got it. An example of success due to the presence of support was provided by Nkosi:

> *"I was active in the ANC.*
> *SANCO would help us.*
> *We took the matter to National,*
> *worked together to fight for electricity,*
> *started strikes.*
> *The mayor came,*
> *and there was a heated discussion.*
> *Construction began."*

On this occasion, the participant and his peers supported each other in confronting the right authorities, which resulted in success.

The support of other participants also emerged as central to creating a 'safe' environment for participants, who referred to instances where they felt as though they could not speak because they thought that nobody would back them up or that their ideas would be dismissed. I call it a 'safe' environment because the residents explicitly spoke about 'being afraid'. So, when the participants received a form of support and encouragement from others within the space, whether facilitators or other participants, it enhanced their ability to contribute to the discussion. For instance, Nolu said:

> *"First, I doubted myself*
>
> *[3]I was not confident I could do the job*
> *I even wanted to stop going to church*
>
> *[4]I was encouraged by other church members*
> *Being elected means there is something I can contribute."*

Similarly, Nkosi also remarked:

> *[4] People can be asked to raise their concerns but*
> *because they are afraid*
> *they keep quiet.*
> *…*
> *[6] But once the facilitators are gone*
> *they have a lot of concerns to raise.*

If one person raises the concern
no one supports them,
people brush things off.

Themba also commented on the empowering feeling of feeling supported, especially by people whom one considers superior in terms of the status quo:

[7] Even though I was lower in terms of work positions,
things like that empowered me
and encouraged me even more.
People had a desire for me
to thrive, encouraging me
to apply for other positions—
"why don't you explore other opportunities?"
That empowered me.

In a way, connecting with others within the space, both facilitators and other participants was enabling for the resident participants.

3. Learning and understanding

The theme of learning and gaining new knowledge and skills emerged in every one of the eight resident participants' narratives, revealing the significance of learning in framing their understanding of participation. Exemplifying this theme, Thandi described her motivation to attend and participate in the TP in the following way:

"I like to learn, and in the project workshops
I gained a lot of knowledge.
I was taught how to work
with local people;
to find and listen
to their needs.
That is why I always attend."

As already mentioned, resident participants hoped to influence decision-making by participating in different activities, from village meetings and developments to protests and workshops. However, for these participants, it emerged that the ability to influence decisions depended on their having and/or gaining a clear understanding of what the participatory activities were aiming to achieve and/or what their role was in achieving these aims, which in turn gave them an idea of how they could contribute. Put differently, understanding the

purpose of an activity or the role participants had been delegated to play emerged as improving their ability to participate effectively. For instance, Themba said:

> *"There were those workshops*
> *which taught us the systems it uses.*
> *I did not have a proper understanding at first,*
> *but as I followed it, I realised*
> *it does those things"*

Bongile also speaks to the process of moving from ignorance to understanding in his narrative – both in relation to his role within the project and in his understanding of his surroundings. In his words:

> *"I didn't understand what it meant to be a CLO.*
> *I didn't know what my duty was*
> *until I read the orientation documents*
>
> *I didn't even know*
> *that what we call joabase,*
> *was wattle.*
>
> *I wasn't familiar with 'cultivate'*
> *or 'uncultivated land,',*
> *but I enjoyed listening to these phrases.*
>
> *I'm learning—I've learned a lot—*
> *learning and gaining experience*
> *from the residents and the Tsitsa team.*
> *I think I'm enjoying it."*

Part of the resident participants' enthusiasm to learn emerged as related to their capacity to share the lessons and skills gained from different activities with those members of their communities who could not attend. The purpose of this sharing was to raise awareness and/or empower other members of their communities. For instance, Kay suggested that:

> *"The project has been a platform to gain knowledge -*
> *the effects of veld fires on the soil,*
> *the damage these cause -*
> *that I share with my community,*
> *with my village leadership.*
>
> *I create awareness."*

In addition, resident participants described experiencing a transformation or shift, either in their thinking or acting, as the result of engaging in the TP's participatory activities. For instance, Nolu indicated that:

> *"I gained knowledge. I have grown.*
> *I never used to notice the river,*
> *but now I am interested in what happens in the river."*

In addition to learning new things and gaining new perspectives, participants also referred to the fact that the TP prompted them to reflect on their own earlier experiences. As Mr Sonwabile put it:

> *"I like that they bring students to the area.*
> *Students arrive almost every year,*
> *they help us remember or talk about things."*

Resident participants also emphasised the roles played and the value of both listening and speaking in learning and influencing decisions. It emerged here that, for the residents, participation involved exchanging knowledge and skills. In this regard, they framed participation as a reciprocal learning process, and themselves, as participants, as epistemic agents. In Kay's words:

> *"We exchanged ideas and experiences.*
> *I was equipped,*
> *exposed to new skills*
> *that I used to teach others."*

Once again, we see Kay speak explicitly here to the desire to foster awareness in the community by sharing knowledge and skills with others.

Finally, curiosity also emerged as related to learning – being eager to learn to be empowered with new knowledge and skills. For instance, Bongile emphasised his curiosity in his narrative. His words were:

> *"I have FOMO, but in a good way.*
> *FEAR OF MISSING OUT ,*
> *I'm curious, like, I don't want to miss out.*
> *I want to be current and updated,*
> *know what is happening to my community."*
> *Again, in the words of Mr Sonwabile:*
> *"I expected to gain some knowledge,*

to add to what I already know;
that is what I like and received;
it was what I wanted."

However, curiosity also emerged as related to confusion, such as when participants described their experiences of being delegated to attend events without much information of what the events were about, which they say resulted in initial confusion. Kay described her confusion upon first encountering the TP:

"I asked myself -
"how does this concern my community?
How will we benefit when we stay so far?
Will these meetings bring change in a positive manner?"

The resident participants viewed learning as a crucial aspect of their participation experience. The final quote highlights one participant's curiosity about the meeting's relevance to her community, which therefore sparked her desire to learn more about the TP. Her consideration of the TP's relevance to her community is related to the theme of recognition because, as the following theme suggests, recognition is necessary to determine what is relevant for her community.

4. Recognition versus tokenism

Recognition – of residents' epistemic agency, value, and status – was another prominent theme across all eight resident participants' narratives and was highlighted in relation to creating an enabling environment by boosting participants' confidence in the participatory space. While several participants struggled with self-doubt in terms of their ability to participate in certain tasks or activities, they reported managing to overcome their fears as a result of the encouragement or validation they received from others. The impact of others' recognition on boosting confidence in participants shows the importance of experiencing support and receiving recognition from other people within the participatory space. Bongile describes this beautifully in his narrative of participation:

"Sometimes I do have something to say:
it makes me comfortable,
I feel more confident,
because you can see me,
you can read me."

We find this idea reiterated in Nolu's narrative.

> *"They elected the executive*
> *and I was nominated.*
>
> *I was shocked to hear this.*
> *First, I doubted myself.*
>
> *I was not confident I could do the job.*
> *[...]*
> *Being elected means there is something I can contribute.*
> *I was encouraged by other church members.*
> *[…]*
> *It gave me confidence"*

Being picked among other people came up in participants' narratives as a form of recognition that improved the participants' confidence to participate. The participants also referred to this idea of getting picked as 'being seen', which brings in another dimension to recognition, visibility. Recognition also surfaced as a form of validation for the value of the contribution they brought into the spaces in which they were called to participate. This emerged in three of the eight narratives. Further to Nolu, quoted above, Mr Sonwabile described this experience:

> *"Being called to participate*
> *means that people value me and my contribution."*

As did Thandi:

> *"To participate means I am recognised*
> *as someone who can make a valuable contribution,*
> *and as an active person."*

On top of being listened to and recognised as epistemic agents or knowers, being seen or recognised as important role players also became evident in participants' narratives, whether it was for voluntary work they had done for the community or for performance at their jobs. Recognition was once again connected to confidence, especially for those in leadership roles or those who influenced positive change. One participant lit up when describing certain roles that they were recognised for, explicitly saying how being recognised boosted their confidence. The impact of recognition of one's role also emerged in instances where a participant initially had self-doubt. For instance, Nolu's case of doubting her abilities to be

church secretary was enhanced by the realisation that her nomination was not a random act, but recognition that she was capable of performing through encouragement from other members. Nkosi also made an example of Tom's (a researcher-facilitator) encouraging words as improving their willingness to participate, reinforcing that feeling supported by others within the space and rooting for them to perform their tasks.

However, selection for certain roles often brought only short-term pride and happiness with it, because it meant that others were left behind; this sometimes meant much pushback from those who were left behind. In such a case, participation became uncomfortable and difficult for resident participants, especially when they were required to engage with the same people who were determined to push back.

As already suggested above, respect, closely related to recognition, features across the different narratives as an enabling factor for participants. Nolu, for instance, spoke extensively about respect in her narrative of participation in the TP:

> *"Attending the Tsitsa workshops,*
> *what I liked most is the respect we are given,*
> *even as elderly women.*
>
> *We are comfortable*
> *in the places we sleep,*
> *and the food we eat is nice.*
> *You feel important.*
>
> *If you mention you're not feeling well,*
> *people check on you and take care of you.*
> *We were treated with respect and care.*

Another interesting form of recognition – the recognition of status – also emerged from the narratives. For instance, Kay speaks to the status afforded to her by virtue of being employed. In her words:

> *"I live and work*
> *in the rural areas.*
> *When I sleep in town*
> *it is nice for me;*
> *it shows*
> *that I am working,*

unlike being in the village."

Here, having a job – being employed – is seen as a primary source of status in the village. This resonates with the residents' hopes for employment, as already mentioned.

Recognition and validation of one's efforts, as well as respect, are centrally important in many participants' experiences of participation and form part of their framing of the concept.

In contrast to recognition, experiences of tokenism were also noted in the narratives – that is, instances where participants felt their invitation to participate would not lead to real influence. Tokenism refers to the idea of people being called to take part under the pretence that their input is required, whereas they are really there for those who initiate the engagement to tick a box, superficially claiming that all relevant views were represented. For instance, Nkosi said:

"Knowing what you say
won't be considered or taken forward
discourages contributing or raising a concern.
But once the facilitators are gone,
people have a lot of concerns to raise."

Recognition constitutes positive associations of participation while tokenism as evident in the above quote constituted negative associations.

5. Other enablers and/or inhibitors of participation: language, age, money, and race

Residents spoke about other factors that either enabled or inhibited their participation. Interestingly, some of these factors were described as enabling in certain instances, but inhibiting in others. These factors include language, age, money, and race.

Language

Language issues (especially English fluency) were identified as inhibiting by most participants. In some instances, a lack of English proficiency prevented residents from participating or led to participants feeling uncomfortable or thinking about quitting. Nolu spoke directly to this sense of discomfort and the thought of quitting. In her words:

"… speaking English;
it was not easy,
it was the first time working

with English-speaking people.

It was frustrating at first.
I was not comfortable
speaking English;
I cannot express myself fully.
I wanted to give up and quit."

Themba also spoke extensively about concerns surrounding the English language. In his words:

"If you take a child from here, and
place them in a town school
there is a big difference
you can blame our education
which was the worst one
some of them studied in Mthatha college
then stay in the village
where they never got exposed
to people who speak English
it affected their confidence to speak
that is the disadvantage we have"

Themba describes his frustrations with the use of difficult English by his secondary school teacher who he believed failed to take their context adequately into consideration. However, while laying the blame at the school teacher's feet, he also indicates that a lack of access to 'good' education and/or exposure to people who speak English puts the residents at a serious disadvantage and inhibits their ability to participate and contribute. That this is the case is especially concerning, given that resident participants framed participation – and in particular, communication during participatory activities – as a reciprocal process.

In both participants' experiences and explanations, it is evident that the lack of English proficiency limited their ability to express their epistemic agency, which, as expressed earlier, is an important element of their view of the concept of participating.

Age

Age also emerged in resident participants' narratives as potentially inhibiting participation and the ability to contribute effectively to certain community-related activities. Age was taken to indicate a speaker's credibility or lack thereof, which can be seen as contributing to

epistemic injustice at the testimonial level (to be discussed further in the discussion chapter). In Themba's words:

> *"if you knew people from this area*
> *it's elderly people,*
> *something being said by a child*
> *they would hardly listen to it"*

Bongile also reiterated this idea in his narrative. In his words:

> *"They don't listen to you,*
> *since they are all older than you.*
> *They just ignore you*
> *"I can't hear from someone younger than me."*

Kay drew on the idea of being positioned or treated as if she was a child. Her statement clearly points to the possibility of epistemic injustice in her words:

> *"I do not like*
> *being treated like a child,*
> *where assumptions are made*
> *or mistakes generalised.*
> *That is not respectful."*

While Kay does not refer to her experience as an instance of injustice, her experience of feeling disrespected points in this direction. Being homogenised as merely a member of the group, whose views are assumed to be similar to those of other members is also a way of silencing. The non-recognition of individuality took away the participants' power to express their epistemic agency, leaving them feeling unsatisfied.

Given that the younger participants raised concerns about lacking credibility in virtue of their age, we would assume that older participants would not lack confidence for the same reason; that they would be assigned credibility and epistemic authority as older members of the community. But interestingly, the issue of age for the elderly was different. During the feedback session, they explained that they felt like they were sometimes also forced or expected by the young people to speak on matters that they did not have much knowledge of; they were given a form of epistemic authority or credibility excess that became uncomfortable when they did not have an answer. In fact, the elderly felt that they always asked for young people's input in many cases, but the younger people felt that, because they were young, they were mainly asked to do things like writing and other errands that did not

necessarily ask for their knowledge. Thus, there were some credibility issues pertaining to age among the resident participants, which also speak to what some of the researcher and implementing agent participants discussed with regard to being aware of context, particularly rules around who is expected to speak and when they are expected to speak. I return to this below.

Money

Resident participants referred to the possibility of earning an income as a reason to participate. Given this, participants also emphasised their disappointment in the TP owing to the amount of money received. For example, Nkosi described a tension between his love of his job, or role in the project, and his disappointment at the amount community liaison officers were paid. In his words:

> *"But the money was not much.*
> *I expected more.*
> *I love my job,*
> *but I also like money."*

In contrast, Thandi felt empowered to be earning some money to help her family as she said:

> *"I started to make some money,*
> *and saw a difference in my life.*
> *I could now contribute towards my family's needs,*
> *and help my husband."*

Similarly, Nolu commented that the money became an incentive for staying in the TP:

> *"I prefer to speak my home language*
> *but after receiving my stipend*
> *and doing some work*
> *I decided to keep at it*
> *and see where it takes me."*

As evident in the above quotes, money received affected the resident participants in different ways; the two women were happy with it, while the young man, whose narrative revealed that he was the breadwinner, was not satisfied. The issue about money was later raised by Anna, one of the researcher participants in section 4.3.1 (participant 12, poem 7), who expressed frustration over the lack of payment for unemployed people's time donated to participatory processes. Money, therefore, seems to play a role.

Race

Another interesting factor here was the constant reference to 'white people'. The participants seemed to associate whiteness with more credibility where there was almost a general sense that the presence of white people implies betterment, or success. When talking about recognition and empowerment, Themba, recalling his schooling days, spoke to this internalised sense of superiority/inferiority:

> *"I was taken to a private school by white people to complete my matric;*
> *Yoh! I had issues when I got there—*
> *English was something I could only write*
> *but it placed me in a better position to understand*
> *and had an impact on my ability to speak.*
> *That empowered me to even stand up*
> *for myself,*
> *and made me become someone—*
> *I got jobs that placed me close to white people"*

Nkosi also spoke to this theme. In his words:

> *"When we saw white people,*
> *we were hopeful*
> *that after the research*
> *they would ensure implementation,*
> *help us as a community,*
> *bring opportunities,*
> *create jobs and skills, because they get things done."*

Despite the hope instilled in residents by the presence of white people, indicative of a distorted view arising from internalised ideas about race, this presence also inhibited participation on the part of many residents. Revealing this tension, Nkosi went on to say that:

> *"Most people left the interviews*
> *after realising it was educated white people*
> *conducting them."*

Many of the statements pertaining to white people reveal a power dynamic operating in the participatory space, which, again, inhibited participation as well as the contribution of different ideas. In Nolu's words:

> *"We attended workshops*
> *and had to explain what we do.*

[…]

The only challenge was doing this
in front of white people.
But I was able to overcome that fear."

The disadvantage of giving others high credibility is that it can cause feelings of self-doubt and, as demonstrated in the passage above, a decision not to participate in certain activities, undermining the substantive or pragmatic intent of the participatory process. The substantive rationale for participation usually places focus on the effectiveness of the outcome of the participatory process, which would be undermined if people decided to stop taking part in activities where their voices are needed.

A comparative consideration of participant themes follows in Section 4.7.

4.3. Researchers

The researchers who took part in this study were mainly a group that was based at Rhodes University from the following departments: the Environmental Science Department, the Geography Department, the Institute for Water Research (IWR), and the Environmental Learning and Research Centre (ELRC). The research team was made up of established researchers and student researchers who were mentored and supervised by the more established researchers. It is worth noting that the academic world is hierarchical – with inherent power structures – designated by titles like Dr and Professor, and functionalities like supervisor, student, coordinators, which could possibly affect their interactions with each other, and with their community partners.

4.3.1: Researcher participants' poems

Participant 9: Tom (6 poems)

Tom is a doctoral student who spent some time living in the Tsitsa catchment, practising his spoken isiXhosa, in order to get a better experience and understanding of the people with whom he was working in the Project. When he joined the Tsitsa Project in 2019, he was not sure what it was really about.

Poem 1 **I enjoy my interactions with people**

[1] My experience was mostly good,
being part of a team.
I got to hang out with friends

on the side.

[2] I love the idea space,
the thinking
and the challenging.

[3] I enjoy exploring theories;
most importantly,
I enjoy my interactions with people,
working on things together,
that practical side of it,
not the academic aspect.

[4] But the best thing
was meeting international people,
who were drawn to it for similar reasons,
connecting with them was super special.

In this poem, Tom explains that his favourite aspect about taking part in certain activities is his interactions with people. He especially enjoys connecting and networking with people with similar interests to his. In stanzas 1 and 3, Tom describes being part of a team as forming a good experience of participation for him, along with the informal connections formed on the side. In stanza 2 he explains that he enjoys sharing knowledge and the thinking and challenges that come with that sharing. He reiterates the fact that the best part about participating for him is the connection with other people, especially those who share similar interests in (stanza 3).

Poem 2

I was hoping to help

[1] I was just another number saying
I believed in the cause.
It made sense at the time.
I was motivated,
spending time and attention.

[2] I helped with coordination
and doing important work:
I felt okay spending time

with the organizations,
the people were genuine.

[3] The binding factor was social,
like a social contract,
like "*yes, I think this is important,*
I'm going to help you do this."

[4] People just seemed to have no power!
I wanted to find out
what mechanisms there were
for them to get power,
for them to engage
with formal governance.

I was hoping to help.

In this poem Tom shows that he is motivated by the importance of an activity, with the hope to help. In stanza 1, he talks about taking part sometimes in order to increase the numbers, motivated by believing in the cause. He explains that participation requires him to invest time and attention, which means he needs to make choices in order to invest those profitably for himself. In stanza 2, he gives an example of taking part in an important activity, where he was motivated by the genuineness of the people within the space to stay and invest more of his time. He also explains that sometimes it is not an obligation as such, but a sort of social contract that binds him to want to help the helpless in some cases in stanzas 3 and 4.

Poem 3 **I expect communication to be bi-directional**

[1] I was uncomfortable
with how the school painting[6]was done;
the school wasn't included
and it wasn't done well.

[2] Participation to me
is not one directional.
It's being told

[6]The school painting was part of Tom's university club which did a school painting as voluntary work. It was not part of the TP, but it was brought in as one of the activities that may have influenced Tom's framing of participation.

what needs to be done,
and being part of the team;

[3] if an activity is participatory
I expect communication
to be bi-directional.

In this poem, Tom emphasises that being part of a team means that one's role transforms from being told what to do, to giving their input on how to take the purpose of the participatory process forward. What is implied here is that there is one who initiates, and tells the others why they are called into the space, then gives the invited an opportunity to speak. First listen, then speak … later exchange.

In stanza 1, he expresses the discomfort that he experienced when he felt like people who needed to be there were excluded, and when an activity was not done well. The school painting experience reveals that Tom did not like it when a participatory activity became an exercise where things are done *on* or *for* people, but instead, *with* the beneficiaries. With his emphasis on being part of a team in the earlier poem, in stanzas 2 and 3 Tom describes participation as a bi-directional communication process, where the one who invites provides enough information to those invited in order to enable them to participate. Stanzas 2 and 3 show that, in order for participation to be bi-directional, everyone should have enough information to be able to contribute, thus making participation meaningful for all who are involved.

Poem 4 **I struggled to find a place**

[1] The local network was down to earth,
sort of activist-focused,
very authentic.

[2] I found the international conference frustrating,
talking about policy:
it was more removed.

[3] I'm not sure what I expected,
active people filling gullies
or something,
not a heavy research project.

[4] I was disillusioned;
the fuzzy relationships,
very little interaction,
disconnected…
massive disconnect.
Different groups
doing their own thing.

I struggled to find a place.

In this poem Tom highlights some of his struggles with entering a new space where those who are already occupying the space have conceptualised the purpose and the manner in which they work, which may sometimes not be aligned with his preconceptions about the activity. In the first stanza, he mentions some of the enabling factors about an activity for his participation and they include a down-to-earth initiative, activist-focused, and authentic. Stanza 2 discloses his frustration with an international conference where the TP was presented, and there was a huge gap between the local TP context discussed in stanza 1, and the conversations and presentations of conference delegates who were talking about high level stuff like policy, and not the practical things that he spoke about in stanza 3 of the poem "*I enjoy my interactions with people*." Stanzas 3 and 4 are about his experiences in the TP: in stanza 3 he reflects on his expectation of the TP, as opposed to the reality of what he found it to be about; and in stanza 4 he continues with the disappointing aspects of the TP, including working in smaller groups (promoting silos), with little interaction, which made it hard for him to find a role within the TP space.

Poem 5 **I've had to adapt my expectations**

[1] When I look back,
initially I was like
oh,
students are flaky,

[2] but now,
actually reflecting,
I had unrealistic expectations.
I don't have to be as hard on everyone.

[3] What could we do,
with no budget?
With no experience?
I had unrealistic expectations
of what we could achieve.

[4] Initially I thought of discrete events;
not aimless, but not optimal.
I was pleasantly surprised
during the first workshop,
monitors were keen and engaged.

[5] I've had to adapt my expectations
to some extent, letting go
of some of my idealism.

[6] Having done that
I understand,
which makes it easier
to see value in the way things are done.

[7] Sometimes,
my expectations are unrealistic,
but I didn't understand at first.

In this poem, Tom reflects on some of his previous expectations when taking part in different activities, which made him judge them unfairly in some instances, due to a lack of understanding. He goes on to share that once he moderated his ideals, he realised that he was able to participate much better than when he was holding onto ideals. Learning and adapting to his new space made participation easier for him. In stanzas 1 and 2, he reflects on the student painting project that he judged to be un-inclusive and badly done stanza 1 of the poem, "I expect communication to be bi-directional". In stanza 1 he recalls calling students flaky, and in stanza 2 he looks back and realises that maybe he had unrealistic expectations. In stanza 3 he mentions all the elements that could have inhibited proper execution of the initiative: lack of enough financial resources, experience and time.

He discusses the TP in stanzas 4 to 6, where again, he says what his expectations were, as opposed to the pleasant reality of the TP way of actually being inclusive and engaging with the monitors hired from the local area that the TP worked in (stanza 4). The contrast between a well though-out engagement of a participatory research process and an *ad hoc* activity like the school painting (discussed in stanza 1 of the poem, "I expect communication to be bi-directional") is revealed here in terms of inclusivity. In stanza 5 he explains that he had to let go of his idealistic expectations, and adapt them accordingly, which increased his understanding and enabled him to find a role (stanza 6). In the 7th stanza he re-states the essence of this poem, which is that lack of understanding can be an inhibiting factor to one's ability to participate.

Poem 6 **You can create depth with specialness**

[1] Monitors were keen and engaged
the good thing was
the CLOs getting experience,
but the value was marginal
to their lives.

[2] The real value
is in the long-term interactions
depth is what makes things stick
in people's minds.

[3] If Phiwe goes to visit,
it's maybe not a big deal,
but it's like, I'm there,
maybe Anna is there;
you can create depth with specialness.

Again, Tom is motivated by making an impact in the lives of the people that he interacts with, and has observed that being different gives you some authority, which he feels could be perceived positively as a way to create depth. What is also evident from the poem is Tom's recognition of his authority over the local people whom he worked with, which he used to make a difference. In the first stanza, his focus is on looking for the marginalized (indeed, one of the residents referred to Tom as encouraging them even when they were sometimes filled with doubt). In stanza 2, he suggests that depth is important for the longer-term impacts of a participatory activity. In stanza 3, he brings in race as a factor influencing participation. Both he and Anna are white, and part of the research team, and he has been there long enough to know that the people listen to him more than his black colleague, Phiwe. As already mentioned in Tom's introductory paragraph, he stayed within the catchment most of his studies working alongside Phiwe, where he got to recognise the difference in how they were received by the communities that they worked with. Given that Phiwe (senior facilitator in the TP) was in a way his superior, he realised that in the eyes of the community, he held more authority because of his race. This is an indication that he knows the context as this is reflected in the way in which the residents, all of whom are black made it a point to mention the presence of white people in the TP.

In general, Tom values inclusion in a participatory space as he spoke about being part of a team, and finding a place, bi-directional communication, and feeling uncomfortable when others were excluded. He was also particular about the kinds of activities he engaged in, mostly investing his time and effort in those where he felt he could potentially help.

Participant 10: Louisa (7 poems)

Louisa joined the project in 2015 when she attended the TP science management meeting, and, when the project was divided into communities of practice, she became the coordinator for the livelihood CoP. She has since conducted many workshops and trainings and meetings.

Poem 1 **They were difficult times for me**

[1] The methods at the time by the teacher,
did not accommodate people like me;
you learn by yourself, then stand and recite.
I didn't enjoy being put on the spot, at all.

[2] I moved to another country,

had very little command of the language.
That factor just completely deprived me
from participating,
in class or with people or friends.

[3] We had to do presentations;
a combination of being shy,
and having to speak in a 2nd language…
now I don't enjoy being put on the spot at all.

They were difficult times for me.

In this poem, Louisa is describing some factors from her childhood that have inhibited her from feeling comfortable participating, including the methods used to conduct a participatory process. These experiences are important for the TP as one of the assumptions underpinning this research is that previous experiences influence future experiences. In stanza 1, she speaks about her teacher and the methods the teacher used that were not conducive for her shy nature (speaking to the role of a facilitator). Importantly, lack of command of the language in a new country seems to have completely limited her ability to express herself (stanza 2), where she speaks about participation as encouraging different voices to come through. In the 3rd stanza she repeats why these were difficult participation times for her: having to present in front of an audience with her shyness and speaking in a second language.

Poem 2

They have an opportunity to contribute

[1] Most of us have found that place
in discussions, to express ourselves freely.
Even when we take the back seat,
we're given opportunities.

[2] I get the sense
that people feel free now
to participate,
to speak when they want to speak.

[3] Our group is quite broad,
but everyone is able to do their best;
there are people that are shy,

and people that hold back,
but in one way or another
they have an opportunity to contribute.

In this poem, Louisa describes her experiences and observations in the Tsitsa Project internal meetings, where she feels that the opportunity is provided for everyone to speak freely (stanzas 1 and 2), that everyone has found a place. However, there are some personality traits that limited some people from taking advantage of such opportunities. In stanza 3, she reiterates the idea that there is freedom to speak, and yet there are people who still hold back due to shyness.

Poem 3 **You don't need to be intimidated**

[1] Participation falls down to various aspects
the topic would be one
the nature of the person
the environment
the facilitator
the balance between.

[2] It's up to the facilitator
making it accessible
employing different teaching styles, approaches and methods
to allow people to participate,
accommodating people like me.

[3] It's a little intimidating,
being in an environment
populated by those hardcore strong scientists.
They have lots of experience.

[4] But you don't need to be intimidated
by the environment we're in
we're multicultural,
multi-language, and
all inputs are valid.

[5] It's a two-way thing
opening opportunities
finding that balance.

In this poem Louisa captures some of the factors that influence people's comfort to participate, drawing from her experiences, listing them in stanza 1. She feels that it is the facilitator's role to make the space conducive for all to feel comfortable, finding a balance in highlighting the different voices (stanza 2). In stanza 3, she speaks about some of the intimidating factors that have limited her ability to speak freely, even though they are experienced scientists in the TP. She goes on to share her observation that the diversity within the space was what made each contribution special, so one does not need to be intimidated by other participants' accolades (stanza 4). Another enabling factor in the TP was knowing that every input was valuable. In stanza 5 Louisa summarises by re-stating the essence of this poem, where participation for her, like Tom, is a bi-directional process: where opportunities are created for everyone to contribute, and to find a balance among all the factors stated.

Poem 4 **You might know the context, but not the dynamics**

[1] In this context,
the culture of participation,
some people
generally
are not allowed.
It's culturally unacceptable
for certain people to speak
more than others,
or they don't speak at all.

[2] It's not just about us:
every community has its leaders,
people that honour the invitation,
women,
more senior citizens.
Men tend to speak more than others about certain topics.
We've seen younger people as well
coming along and being quite vocal.

[3]As the person trying to facilitate,
you should be aware of who the participants are;
you might know the context,
but not the dynamic -
that takes a while.

You got to draw on tools and approaches
that give people opportunities.

Again here, Louisa brings up the issue of opportunities for all to speak, and the role of the facilitator in making this possible. In stanza 1, she alerts us to the importance of taking time to learn about the culture of participation, sort of like the rules surrounding who speaks, when, and about what, in addition to the context that one works as an outsider. In stanza 2, she talks about "*it's not about us (outsiders)"*, but about the community, and the people who honour the invitation. In this way, as a facilitator, it becomes clearer how you can encourage more voices, especially the often silenced (stanza 3).

Poem 5 **You got to be quite confident to challenge that**

[1] I'm by nature a shy person,
starting from school.
I won't be the first person to raise my hand.
I didn't enjoy being put on the spot at all.

[2] Participants could sound quite harsh,
getting their point across quite strongly;
the more confident carry their voice,
but the shy take a while to voice their opinion.

You got to be quite confident to challenge.

In this poem, Louisa reveals that her shy nature inhibits her from speaking by her shy nature, as do the sometimes highly vocal participants. In stanza 1, she repeats the statement that she does not enjoy being put on the spot at all, which is what she felt took place whenever she spoke and other people listened. Stanza 2 touches on the influence of other participants within the participatory space, and the effects that that had on shy people like her. The issue of other participants also came up in an earlier poem where Louisa commented on experienced scientists whom she found intimidating when she first entered the TP space. In her observations in stanza 3, she realised that some participants were enabled to speak by their confidence.

Poem 6 **I had to find my strategies**

[1] I had to find my strategies -
you have to find your own.
One is really shy in certain places, but not in others.

I would pose my thoughts to a smaller group,
or one-to-one,
during break or leisure time.
My voice will carry through
to the bigger group
at a later stage.

[2] Covid-19 restrictions put us back.
I remember
when we first started with zoom meetings,
that was a challenge!

[3] Now you got to raise your hand,
you got to not only think
about what you want to say,
you got to manoeuvre through the interface.
We've got a hang of it -
the good facilitators we have help.

The poem speaks to strategies that can assist in highlighting more voices. In stanza 1 Louisa speaks about how she copes with her shy nature in participatory spaces; finding a suitable place to express her views with the hope that those she speaks to will relay her views to the bigger group. Secondly, in difficult situations such as online meetings, the facilitator plays a big role in making everyone feel comfortable enough to speak.

Poem 7 **You can let go**

[1] Even though I don't
speak the language
it doesn't really affect me much.
I don't remember times
I haven't contributed if I wanted to.

[2] You let control go.
You're getting the essence of what's happening.
You don't need to understand
every
single
word:
you can read people;

you can let control go.

[3] It's critical that,
whoever you're working with,
you realign yourselves beforehand.
If there is trust between the facilitator and yourself,
as a non-local-language-speaking person.

Contrary to the preceding poems, in this poem Louisa does not feel inhibited by her lack of language command, mainly because she has the authority to ask when she does not follow through her observations (stanza 1). Maybe part of the reason is knowing the objectives-and deciding to play the role of an observer instead of an active participant. In stanza 2, she refers to 'letting go of control' as a way to ease herself into participating. This seems to imply that holding on to control may sometimes be inhibiting for some people, especially those who belong to the facilitating team. Thirdly, trusting one's team so that even though you may not have command of the language used, you have faith in your team to do the job so that little time is spent on translating. What this 3rd stanza elicits is the idea of trust as an enabling factor. In all, Louisa, like Tom, places emphasis on participation including all relevant voices, and for Louisa, it is the facilitator's duty to use methods that encourage the different voices to come through. Understanding the context in which one works, especially the social dynamics surrounding the culture of participation is important for the facilitator, who is usually an outsider. Her shyness has had a great influence on her participatory journey, from inhibiting her early on, to driving her to find coping strategies to contribute without drawing attention to herself. She finishes off by stating that letting go of control and trusting others enables participation as well.

Participant 11: Kathy (7 poems)

Kathy first came into the TP when she was an assistant to one of the earlier members of the project. While working as an assistant, she completed a Master's of Education thesis that critically examined and analysed TP processes. She later became the overall TP project manager, and has been part of many TP workshops and meetings.

Poem 1 **It's about understanding different values**

[1] It's about understanding different values
being honest, with yourself,

and the people you're interacting with.
There's an expectation that we come
from the same culture,
so you'll have the same values as me,
but that's not necessarily true.

[2] I wasn't actually going to be considered -
throw your morals out the window!
I had this inner strength,
this sense of saying:
this doesn't sit comfortably with me.

[3] The headmaster told me:
"if you want any chance,
reconsider your friendship with this person."
I ignored that,
and told him "no."
I got made head prefect;
maybe that was the thing -
I stood up for myself,

[4] that's when I realised,
without knowing,
what my values were.

[5] If there was more
of a sense of participation,
people need to feel comfortable enough
to put their hand up and say:
I don't understand.

In this poem, Kathy goes back to when she was at school, highlighting the importance of people's values, and the need to recognise that they can be different, even for people belonging to similar groups.

Kathy speaks about the influence that values have in the participatory space in terms of differentiating the different people in stanza 1. In the same stanza, she speaks against the tendency to homogenise people who belong to the same culture. In the 2nd and 3rd stanzas, she shows how one's values guide them to make important participation decisions, such as what they are and are not willing to compromise in their participation. In some way, values are what make people different, and act as their strengthening factors in their interaction with other people.

Poem 2 **Being heard**

[1] Being heard, for me,
means I was allowed to say
what I wanted to say
respectfully.
It was noted down,
or acknowledged,
or shared as a point of discussion,
and I didn't feel belittled
when I was speaking.

[2] But I speak in a way most don't understand.
They give that sort of blank nod,
taking notes.
You know that they haven't understood a word.
I made it clear that I was aware;
that helped them begin to feel comfortable.

[3] People that live here don't seem to be featuring,
and those meetings where I felt like,
this is rubbish…
I just spent an hour driving here…
I'm bored out of my head…
I could be doing other things,
I haven't been invited, in any way, to do anything:
nothing's going to change.
You don't feel fulfilled.

In this poem, Kathy explains what being heard looks like (stanza 1), as opposed to feeling tokenised (stanza 3). Her idea of participation involves her voice forming part of the outcome of a process, and being respected, and her ideas acknowledged and noted as noted in stanza 1. She recognises her own shortcoming in the way she relays her views that may sometimes not be accessible to her listeners, and has tried to explain herself to improve the situation. Self-awareness seems to be an enabling factor for Kathy in stanza 2. In stanza 3 she speaks about time-wasting activities as the ones where she never feels that she was invited to contribute in any way. This reveals that some people attend activities that are meant to be participatory to contribute instead of increasing the numbers. Kathy would feel that her time was better invested if she at least got a chance to speak, which reinforces the importance of speaking for her in framing the meaning of participation.

Poem 3 **I might be the voice of authority**

[1]It's so strange how roles,
and the associated authority,
change people's perception of who you are,
and how you behave,
even if you don't think you've changed.

[2] There's almost an expectation
that in a particular role,
you'll know or understand certain things:
suddenly I might be
the voice of authority.

[3] We did a presentation;
people went
"ha okay
we've heard what you've said
and that made sense."

[4] That definitely was a highlight,
I suppose:
recognition, in a way,
a verbal acknowledgement
in spaces like that.

[5] Academia sometimes drives me nuts,
but there are times when you need
to have that kind of recognition
in those kinds of spaces.

In stanza 1, Kathy feels that as one's role changes, the way you are heard can also change – you feel the same, but your role confers epistemic authority on you. She is experiencing a different level of credibility in her new role as a project manager, which makes her uncomfortable because she wishes people could just act the same around her. The level of perceived authority that comes with her new role has people giving her an excess of credibility, which is something she did not expect because she felt that she had not changed. The following direct quote is an extract from her narrative used here to contextualise the first stanza since not everything could not necessarily be put in the poems:

> "*…you know, I still regard myself as a coordinator, I mean, that's what I do, I coordinate people, and things, and I look after budgets, you know, and yet there is a sense that oh no, Kathy must get invited to this meeting because she's a coordinator because suddenly I am the voice of authority on the TP."*

In the second stanza she states how the change in perception also raises people's expectations of them. In stanzas 3 and 4, she describes recognition for what she had done, which became a highlight for her in that participatory space. In this way, being recognised for her contribution formed a positive experience of participation. Then in stanza 5, she explains that there are spaces like academia where recognition is important, especially the kind where one is recognised by people who are considered experts in a particular field. This poem generally speaks about how other people's recognition influences one's experiences of participation.

Poem 4 **You can't just parachute in and hope**

[1] Growing up with other little children
there were lots of games,
playing together.
There was a lot of freedom
to do what we liked,
because we understood the rules.

[2]When I started working in the film industry,
You can't get the job done
if people don't understand what they need to do.
It is client driven, completely.
It is not necessarily participatory,
not that democratic.
In that space,
it's necessary for it to be hierarchical.

[3] If I am in someone else's space
(which I always am in the Tsitsa)
I need to respect the rules.
I might not agree
but I am just a visitor;
that's how I like to allow myself to participate.

[4] This isn't going to be sustainable
if we don't work together,
if we don't start bringing in the voices
of the people that live in the space.

[5] If we allow the space for conversation,
we start getting a much better picture.

You can't just parachute in and hope.

In this poem, Kathy discusses the importance of being aware of one's context. In stanza 1 the rules in context enable freedom to participate, as long as it is within the bounds of the rules of participation within the context that she is working in. In stanza 2, she asserts that there are instances when hierarchies sometimes help to get the job done. In stanza 3, she talks about being a visitor in the Tsitsa catchment, and how as an outsider it is always enabling to understand and respect the rules. She also highlights the need to ensure the inclusion of the voices of the people who are likely to be impacted by the decisions made in that particular participatory process (stanza 4). The different voices are important in the conversation to give a better understanding of the issue at hand. '*You can't parachute and* hope' places further emphasis on the need to include local voices, not make decisions for them and hope that they will accept them (stanza 5).

Poem 6 **I was more respected in those spaces than in the reverse**

[1] I was an exchange student -
you're a bit of a novelty.
They use you a bit like a show horse:
"*There's a person with a funny accent*
comes from this place,
you got to come to this."

[2] Once they get over the fact
that you speak funny,
they just want you to be involved.
It probably helped that I was white,
and I'm not really shy.

[3]I remember one meeting in particular,
he looked at me and he waved,
you're the only one here that's white and speaks English,
she's going to have to translate to you.
Very often
in those spaces,
I was more respected
than in the reverse situation,
in a space with more white people than black people,
they're not as respected as I felt in those spaces.

There's no acknowledgement
that there might be a language barrier;
there's almost arrogance to that.

[4]I've certainly been in meetings where you feel uncomfortable.
The person running the meeting is trying to be kind
but underlying that is this tension of
"there are foreign-speaking people in our midst."

[5] In the isiXhosa space it's almost as though it's okay
to call a person out for being different:
you're white
you're English-speaking
you're female
but it's cool
you can stay in our meeting
but we're not going to translate

There's no confusion,

[6]Whereas the colonial English way of doing things is:
"oh hello everybody, how are you?"
Not, "*excuse me*
there are some people in this room that don't speak English,
would you mind if…."

It's important to acknowledge that space,
particularly if they are new people in that space.

Kathy highlights tokenism in this poem – the "tick box" of presence – but not meaningful presence. She expresses this in relation to "being different". As an exchange student this difference was in her accent – but remembering that, moves her to reflect on the differences that come with race, and a different first language. She realises she was more respected as an "outsider" exchange student than black, isiXhosa-speaking participants were at some meetings she observed. Kathy's poem reflects some of the tensions related to race that she experienced at different stages of her participatory journey. With the exchange student

experience in the 1st stanza, Kathy felt a bit tokenised at first, but later felt genuinely included (stanza 2).

In stanza 2, she suggests that the genuine acceptance was mainly because she was of similar race as the other students and unlike Louisa above, she was not shy. As she said in her narrative: "*I mean, it probably helped that I was white, I think the kids that weren't had, depending on where they were, and that's the one good thing about Rotary, they weren't going to place a black kid in a white school, you know, they weren't stupid.*" What the stanza reveals is that sometimes having something in common with those around you in a participatory space can potentially enhance one's experience of participation, and in Kathy's case, race was that commonality.

In stanza 3, she speaks about a particular meeting that she attended outside Fort Beaufort (in the Eastern Cape, South Africa), a predominantly isiXhosa-speaking area. Kathy found that there was acceptance of a white English-speaking person in an isiXhosa meeting when the facilitator motioned to her that her (Kathy) isiXhosa-speaking colleague would quietly translate the proceedings to her because there were no prior arrangements for a translator. She felt more respected in that black-led space than she had previously felt that black people were in white-led spaces. Her experience of attending predominantly white-led meetings is the lack of acknowledgement that there might be language issues in recognition of non-white people who might not be that fluent in English. For her, the white-led meeting space is experienced as arrogant.

In stanzas 4 and 5, she speaks about uncomfortable (tokenistic) experiences in black-led spaces, where she feels like the acknowledgement of her presence as a different race is not genuine but a way to put her on the spot and make her feel that, even though she was recognised, no special arrangements were going to be made because she was in their space. These two stanzas represent a stark contrast to what has been stated in stanza 3 above, which implies that the main influencing factor might be more related to people's character and/ background than to their race. It also implies that there might be white-led meetings that are sensitive to language barriers as much as there are black-led spaces that have elicited both inclusion through translation by someone close to the non-isiXhosa speaker and spaces that simply did not accommodate the non-language speaker.

However, in stanza 6, it seems that she would rather be acknowledged and not be accommodated than the passive way that predominantly English-led spaces skip over the language issues. The language issue is relevant, especially in the South African context where many academic researchers like Kathy usually find themselves working in areas where literacy rates are low due to our colonial history. For her, the acknowledgment of the gap (space) in language is important in order to recognise new voices in the space.

Poem 7 **Easing my way into an occupied space**

[1] It's about accepting
that it won't necessarily go
the way you wanted it to go,
and that's okay.

[2] They had worked together
for years,
quite set on the ways that they worked.
I arrived with a different way of thinking.

[3] I don't want to say your system is wrong or right,
but I want to understand how it works,
and can we possibly work on tweaking some things?

[4] I needed people to understand
that they needed to feel comfortable
in the space
we were working in.

[5] That's a learning from my own self,
you know,
my own experience of people
nodding their heads,
staring at me.
You just know they don't understand.

Kathy discusses how one needs to ease into a new participatory space, especially one that has already been occupied by other people. In addition to one's personal issues, there is the challenge of a fully conceptualised way of working, which may sometimes not resonate well with the new person.

In stanza 1, she refers to the idea that even though people may come into a space with preconceived assumptions or expectations, it is more enabling to come in with an open mind that things may not go as expected. In stanza 2, she speaks about entering an occupied space, one that almost seemed closed for the person to fit in with their different ways of thinking. She wants to learn about the new space without criticising what the existing team does (stanza 3), as a way to figure out the best way to make changes that incorporate the new person/voice. She was enabled by her previous experience and self-awareness that she sometimes speaks in a way that people don't understand (stanza 4).

Poem 8 **Some of it is like hope**

[1] That slight shift
in how people view their participatory opportunities;

it's a tiny little handful of things.

[2] We don't have trackers on them.
We don't know how many other people they are speaking to.
that's very difficult to track;

some of it is like hope,

[3] and we just keep doing it
hoping that maybe
someday
things will change.

Kathy reflects on the idea that part of the motivation to keep doing the work is hope; having faith in the work that one does and hoping that it will lead to a positive result. In stanza 1, she refers to the impact being just a *"tiny little handful of things",* maybe some not even be easy to relate directly to the work. She also speaks to the idea that some of the impact may not be easy to track (stanza 2), that is why you just rely on faith and hope for the best (stanza 3).

In all, Kathy's idea of participation is about being included, heard, and recognised for one's contribution to the process of participation. She realises that understanding that people have different values is one way to encourage recognition and respect for individuals instead of homogenising them. She values context and feels like nothing useful can be achieved without the inclusion of the local people who are likely going to be most impacted by the decisions made in the space. She also speaks about understanding the rules of one's context, and how that enables more freedom to participate. She refers to the need to find a place in occupied spaces, and how she has managed in her previous experiences. Otherwise, the work that is done is mainly backed up by the hope that it might lead to positive impacts, even if it is not in the intended or visible manner. The idea of hope can be linked to the idea of emergent outcomes after participation processes.

Participant 12. Anna (8 poems)

Anna is a university professor who was part of the project from inception, but had to step away from envisaging and shaping the TP structure and processes because a conflict of interests arose when she needed to bid for funding for her team when calls were made. She has since headed the governance community of practice (Gov-CoP) within the Tsitsa Project and facilitated one of the biggest workshops towards developing a catchment vision through an adaptive planning process. She has facilitated many other workshops and supervised several of the students doing research in the TP.

Poem 1 **I connected with the earth**

[1] When I was at school
we walked
in a wilderness
I connected with the earth.

[2] From that experience
I began to share

the idea
of people being part
of the world.

[3] Teaching biology,
I started a school wildlife society -
began
to talk to colleagues
to the headmaster
to pupils.
That was my first participation.

In this poem Anna describes her motivation for her first participation, which was triggered by her experience in the wilderness. The poem generally speaks to the idea that in the participatory space, people come with different motivations. Stanzas 1 and 2 show this one walk in the wilderness as a trigger for Anna to begin her participation journey in environmentally related topics. In stanza 3, she speaks about sharing her ideas with other people, and viewing that as her first participation.

Poem 2 Voices that are more critical

[1] 1995 -
a new water law!
In the making.
The chance to share what participation can do -
realising
that connection with people
listening and writing
deep learning
taking people with you
can make stuff happen.

It was at this point that my vision shifted

[2] Shifting
from using participation just to protect the environment
to realising that if you did not connect
with people where they were,
there would be nothing

to protect.

[3] Learning
A broader idea of participating
in ways that work towards
doing things
together.

[4] In the water law review
I failed
to sufficiently connect people and
ecology
the rivers, wetlands, seeps, lakes, groundwater….
with the people who use
and abuse
them.

[5] Slowly
with my supervisors
  with my students
    with participants in workshops
I discovered the meaning
of power relations.

[6] Out of uncomfortable experiences
I realised
what emerges out of power imbalances.
between
  myself and others
between
  government and people "on the ground"
between
  researchers and people "on the ground"

[7] The danger
of inherent power imbalances
in relationships.

[8] Tom – a student - said:

"you come in, speaking English, and take from people"
that drove the shift
from translating from English
to isiXhosa
in workshops
to the other way around.
A huge learning experience.

[9] After workshops we reflect.
Sometimes
people have voiced discomfort:
"did you notice some of the less-good things?"
things I had filtered out
cocooned
with the warm and fuzzy feeling.
Even though
feedback that it's going well
is a big driver,

I really value voices that are more critical.

In this poem, Anna talks about her reflective practice, and how that has helped her to learn and become more aware of some mistakes that needed to corrected, and that this explicit recognition of some of the mistakes allowed for changes to be made, which led to better participation. This looks like what Kathy referred to in her narrative, speaking about creating spaces for conversations. The reflective spaces seem to have helped Anna to get a better picture of how the interaction went. In stanza 1, from her experience of taking part in the water law reform process, she realized that human connection was good to make stuff happen, which shifted her eco-centric vision in stanza 2 to realizing that human connection was necessary to reach long-term environmental protection. In this poem, reflection led to adaptation and new insights. She realized (stanza 3) that learning to collaborate helped with getting to the root of problems. Feelings of failure from past events further substantiated her shift in vision as evident in stanza 4, where she gives an example of how the reason for failure was the lack of collaboration. In stanza 5, through different interactions, she discovered the meaning of power relations and gives examples of where power imbalances may arise, which was triggered by discomfort in stanzas 6 and 7.

In stanza 8, Anna refers to a comment made by one of her students relating to power dynamics brought about by language, which triggered another shift in the way she worked. Another idea in stanza 8 is the idea of listening to her young team member, which shows her awareness of power dynamics and actively shifting them in her working environment. In stanza 9, she reiterates her ideas around collaboration by reflecting with her team, and says that even though the big driver is to share what went well, it is often more valuable to hear the criticisms. In this way, learning and adapting is a huge part of the way she chooses to participate, paying attention to the critical voice. At the same time there is an acknowledgement that sometimes discomforts are filtered out, and that it is easier to ignore them while focusing on the things that seem to be working.

Poem 3 **My whole person**

[1] In the Tsitsa, my experience
has required that I engage
with my whole person
physically
emotionally
intellectually.
It has drawn out of me
that response.

[2] Respect your catalytic capacity
a thought
that recognises
I'm good at having the idea and
making it happen.

[3] The team is better at uncovering diversity,
allowing it to come out.
Listening to them
changed practice,
changed participation,
helped me let go.

[4] It's been hard to let go of controlling.
The hardest lesson of participation

is being willing to step back
and watch something unfold,
respecting the process.
I don't even know if I do it very well.

In this poem Anna describes her experience of the Tsitsa Project, highlighting learning to let go as one of her hardest and biggest lessons. That she had to recognise achieving this level of awareness and openness to change required her to engage herself fully, and maybe that is sometimes what participation means, in terms of the effort it takes to make it work.

So far, the most prominent theme of Anna's story is learning and adapting. In this poem as well, the theme comes out again in stanza 1, as she states that it drew out a particular response from her. Implicitly, her context determines how she chooses to participate. Self-awareness in stanza 2 is enabling for her, and her recognition of her team's strengths led to improvement in the practice of participation and helped her let go of trying to be in control, allowing the process to unfold in better ways. In stanza 4, she reflects on the self-doubt about her ability to trust fully, thereby respecting the process as she continues the shift from using participation as a means. In this way, there is a shift into the emancipatory approach to participation in her work.

Poem 4 **If we left behind any seed of agency….**

If you'd asked me at the beginning,
what the only real outcome would be….

it would be
the possibility of somebody in the catchment,

a person with a personal mission
to make participation happen

if we left behind any seed of agency

If we leave government
more willing to create spaces
to enable that…

In this poem, Anna talks about what her initial expectations were when first entering the Tsitsa Project space, which were in some way, similar to those of Tom, to try to facilitate the creation of spaces for marginalised communities to express their agency. But Anna's tone in this poem feels like this expectation changed to at least leaving government more willing to create spaces to enable the expression of agency. As the process unfolded, she seems to have had to re-align her goals with what she had in context. Again, context is still a big influence for her.

Poem 5 **I would turn myself inside out – for that**

[1] If I could persuade someone
to see that vision
the entry point
of human connection
I could then persuade them to do all sorts of things.

[2] If I met someone who didn't
I would turn myself inside out to draw them
into that kind of shared vision

But the persuasion…

[3] I have a deep experience
of not being able to
persuade people.

In this poem, Anna reflects on the importance of one's ability to be persuasive in order to get what one wants out of a process. Human connection plays a role in building towards a shared vision (stanza 1), and once human connection has been established, persuasion is easy. She refers to going the extra mile if she meets anyone who does not share a similar vision (stanza 2). In stanza 3, Anna learned from her hard experiences of not being able to persuade people; again, learning from her experiences and making changes in future engagements.

Poem 6 **Respectful relationships**

[1] For me the story is
this deep need
for people to live in a constructive relationship

with the world,
and if we did not have respectful relationships
with each other,
and if the human relationship was not intact,
what you're left with is just activism,
I wanted partnerships
with the chance of building stuff.

[2] My whole way of working in my life
has been networked,
it has been engaging actively with people,
all the time,
where my experience and their experience
together
could take something forward.

[3] So participation and engagement,
and learning by doing,
is how I live.
Feedback has been the driver
the conscious feedback of
how I experience
the person I'm engaging with.

[4] I could always stand on a stage
and talk
but individual interactions
and social spaces
were
extremely difficult.

[5] Always
human connection
was the entry point.
I wanted to be friends
to create relationships
with people who shared a vision.
I feel good when we can come to a common view.

[6] In becoming personally engaged with people,
I was also vulnerable.
Enthusiasm for the shared vision
creates a vulnerability,
and there were people
who took advantage of that,
and I was hurt quite badly.

[7] I love it when you see people
engaged in those "learning words" workshops.
A highlight -
going into those spaces
watching how the idea
that you could start from,
something everybody knew
and move
into learning new things
together
from each other.

[8] The sense in that room,
that people were relaxed
and present
and experiencing more freedom…..
and I wasn't talking at people.

[9] I have deep feelings
of satisfaction
out of contributing.

[10] Tsitsa has been a hard task place for me.
An emotional space
the hardest and most raw, real engagement
that I have been part of.
It has been walking in a vulnerable, open way.
It's been "very":
very rewarding, very scary, very hurtful,
VERY INTENSE.

Here, Anna talks about some of the tensions involved in trying to connect with others in the participatory space. Sometimes connecting with others is helpful towards a shared vision, but also exposes one's vulnerabilities that can sometimes be used against them. She also refers to respectful relationships, which could imply those that are not used to take advantage of others, but are genuinely used to take things forward, such as being networked for future purposes.

In the first stanza she reiterates her belief in the value of human connection in aiding collaboration towards building something. Her participation was enabled by networking and collaboration with others whose experiences complemented hers, and together they could "build stuff" (stanza 2). Learning by doing and human connection have determined how she participates (stanza 3). In stanza 4, she reflects on earlier days when she was quite shy when it came to individual interactions, claiming that public speaking was easier, making shyness a barrier to human connections. For her, human connection increases the chances for a common view/vision (stanza 5). In stanza 6, she alerts us that human connection can lead to vulnerability to those unsuspecting, or even lead to exploitation and hurt (this is reminiscent of Themba seeing someone experience 'hurt' out of participating). She gives an example of using common knowledge to create a connection with others, which again, became a learning experience for her (stanza 7).

Then, in stanza 8, she expresses her satisfaction over the impact that the connection created in stanza 7; where she felt that the freedom to speak felt by the participants, and that she was better understood. The statement "…*and I wasn't talking at people*" implies that she knew that she was getting blank nods like Kathy, and she had finally managed to find a way to balance that limiting factor in her communication. Like Tom, who was also impressed by how engaged the monitors were in the same activity. She described the TP as an emotionally charging yet satisfying space for her in stanza 10.

Poem 7 **It was the biggest failure moment for me**

[1] It's difficult to experience the consequences of my personality.
Molly left.
She was gone.
why had she not been able to talk to me?
how bad had my behaviour been?

I was left with this huge emotional void.
It was the biggest failure moment for me.

The others….

[2] You could say we've done nothing
except show this deep inequity in participation;
that when we participate,
the only people not being paid for their time,
are the people who give us the data.
It drives me crazy.
It's fundamentally exploitative.

[3] We needed to leave behind people
empowered
to act in a governance space.

[4] We have CLOs who are that interface,
but they are tied to the period of the project,
when we stop paying them,
will they continue?
if they don't
we're exactly back where we started.

In this poem, Anna expresses feelings of disappointment when things do not go as planned. Losing a member of her team as a consequence of her personality (stanza 1) felt like failure on her part since channels of communication were blocked between Anna and her colleague as evident in the line "*why had she not been able to talk to me*?". In stanza 2, she raises the issue of an exploitative system that only pays for the project team and leaves out the people who provide information about the place in which they live. For Anna, not paying for everybody's time promotes inequalities in the participatory space. In the last two stanzas of this poem, she expresses her frustration over the impossibility of sustaining participatory efforts beyond project funding, and the risk of not leaving them empowered to act without the catalytic support provided by the project team. There is a contradiction in this poem, where Anna speaks about the unfairness of not paying others and leaving some people behind, yet in the last stanza she states what could be viewed as a disadvantage for paying the people who the initiative was meant to empower since the monetary incentive (instrumental) overshadows the empowerment goal. This could be viewed as an example of the limitation of research in terms of monetary benefit; in the first instance, mainly unemployed people have to donate their time, the rest of the participants and the organisers get salaries. In the second, the temporary jobs offered by the project are valuable, but they are temporary, and so the CLOs remain precarious.

Poem 8 **It is the way I learn**

[1] I sat in a meeting that I didn't understand[7],
I was excluded,
not able to contribute,
got bored,
concentration wandered.
I felt
what the hell am I doing all these hours?

[2]Until then
I wouldn't have said I was exercising power,
up to that moment;
I would've thought I was being sensitive,

[7] This was the first fully isiXhosa workshop—this is how she realised how Xhosa-speakers might have felt in all the English workshops!

and helpful, but I was running it the way
I knew how to run it.

[3] I didn't flag language as critical,
until you[8] came,
and named it;
all of a sudden, your question
allowed me to acknowledge a discomfort
I had covered up,
it was too uncomfortable.

[4] I began to align my academic work
with my advocacy work;
I met people who introduced me to transdisciplinarity,
as a word; a concept
a way of living.
The idea of complexity was added to that.

[5] Not just an idea.
As I read
it all made sense to me,
it allowed me to explain myself
to myself
the person I am and how I work.

[6] There is a deep connection
between my emotional experience,
my intellectual growth,
and the way I work and practice.

Participation is a foundational living path for me.
It is the way I learn.

In this poem, Anna discusses some language matters that she has experienced. In the first instance (stanza 1) it is about feeling excluded due to a meeting being run in isiXhosa – which she did not understand, and which in turn prevented her from contributing to the discussion and resulted in her feeling bored and as though she had wasted her time. In this way, being

[8] Here Anna is referring to learning the concept of epistemic injustice through my Master's research.

able to express her epistemic agency is important to her, and feeling limited to do so contributes to negative associations with participation. Through this experience, Anna got to experience what the residents have had to endure at all those times when TP engagements were run in English with quite limited translation.

However, this experience alerted her to the unintentional exercise of power over others due to not knowing better when she ran activities in English and then translated to isiXhosa (stanza 2). She was unaware of the level of power and tokenism that came out of speaking in a language that the majority of the audience did not understand well as the primary mode of communication – even with translation. Stanza 3 reflects how, throughout her working experience, Anna had been uncomfortable about language and the experience of listening to isiXhosa allowed her to uncover discomforts that she had felt, but could not previously acknowledge and act on. In stanzas 4 and 5, she gives an example of more concepts that allowed her to label what she was already doing, but could not effectively explain before. In this way, gaining these epistemic concepts empowered her to engage better with other people. She feels like participating in the different activities throughout her life has contributed to both her personal and professional life through the different lessons.

The last two lines of this poem summarise Anna's narrative, which shows how she started to participate, the mistakes she made, and the failures that came with such mistakes. But most importantly, Anna's narrative highlights her growth that was brought about by allowing herself to learn from those mistakes, and adapt the way she works as she goes.

Participant 13: Aya (5 poems)

Aya is the Tsitsa Project catchment coordinator. She started as a field assistant in 2016, and travelled around the catchment a lot and got to interact with many people. In her current position, she works closely with all the participants involved, from residents, researchers, government, and implementers. She describes her job as a networking job.

Poem 1 **The power of shared spaces**

[1] Playing;
that type of participation is easy for me,
you don't talk much,
you just show what you can do,

be part of the team.

[2] Sports;
big way that you feel like you're participating,
every person has a role to play,
even if you're sitting on the bench,
somehow, you're still a participant,
you're all working
towards the same goal.

[3] We underestimate the power of shared spaces,
learning from each other,
engaging people you'd not have
engaged on a normal day.
You feel like
I have a chance
to be influential somehow.

[4] We underestimate the power of shared spaces,
connections that have grown,
building networks
and building relationships.
It's not so difficult in person.
It's nice to interact,
especially if you meet new people.

Now that everything's online,
you lose concentration easily.

In the first stanza, Aya explains that she considers playing games with her friends as a child as a form of participation, since she becomes a part of a team. In stanza 2, taking part in sports is also considered a participatory activity because, in addition to being part of a team and everyone having a role to play within the team, there's a similar goal that everyone is working towards. Stanzas 3 and 4 acknowledge the powerful impact of shared spaces; they allow for learning to happen and to feel empowered to be influential, through engaging with powerful people that one may not have had access to without the participatory space (stanza 3). In stanza 4, shared spaces are deemed powerful for encouraging human connections that are

enabling in the participatory space (even though Covid-19 restrictions on movement, and the use of online communication had undermined the powerful role of shared spaces).

Poem 2 The confidence that I have, I can't lie and say I came with it

[1] You're so scared
you're going to say something stupid
something that's not good enough:
I'm just going to shut up
so I'm safe
I don't want to look like an idiot.

[2] People who talk
in these spaces
are the most confident.

[3] At my first Tsitsa Project meeting
I remember thinking:
I have no idea what these people are talking about
I have no idea why I am in this meeting
I was just there
no participation
not that it wasn't allowed
it wasn't the right time
or the platform.

[4] I had to get used to so many
so many white people
I was like:
What the hell
I'm missing half of the stuff he's saying
he talks a lot
and talks fast.

[5] The project brings everybody together
we push each other,
that support structure
people rooting for you;
it's easy to be your true self,

to reach your potential
or even build towards it.

[6] Open up
You've acquired the knowledge
from within
also from the space.

[7] The confidence that I have
I can't lie and say I came with it
it grew as I was part of the project:
learning the different mannerisms,
how to behave in certain spaces;
I can't be the standard myself everywhere.

You build confidence over time.

This poem speaks to confidence – and the way Aya discovered TP participation as a space that enabled her confidence. In some spaces she does not feel confident to speak, but she is confident in some when feeling safe and supported by the people she is interacting with. This is in contrast to what is implied in the first stanza, where it feels that she doubts her credibility and is afraid to be judged unfairly. For her, in stanza 2, confidence is what enables other people to speak in the participatory space. Among the researchers, the idea of confidence emerges in four of the five researcher participants, that is, all except Tom. In stanza 3, Aya reflects on her TP experience and the early experience of "wrong timing" for her to fully engage, due to the confusion arising from insufficient information. An interesting phrase also comes up in stanza 3, "*not that I wasn't allowed*", which in a way shows that those who entered the space before her held the power to either allow or deny her the opportunity to speak. Unlike the other participants, in this 3rd stanza, Aya attributes her inability to speak to time instead of being denied the opportunity.

Another barrier for her. as evident in stanza 4. was race, where she struggled to connect with the white people filling the room, especially given how fast they spoke, which shut her out of the conversation most of the time during those initial stages of joining the TP team. Having settled into the TP space, she found the TP space enabling for her through the support she received from other people within the space (stanza 5). She explains the support from others

provided her the safety (which she did not feel she had in stanza 1) to be her true self. In stanzas 6 and 7, acquiring knowledge boosted her confidence within the TP space as opposed to when she first entered (stanza 3), as she had managed to adapt some of her mannerisms to fit into the new context.

Poem 3 **Slowly, I started to have a voice**

[1] Slowly, I started to have a voice
and to participate
within the project,

[2] being given things to do that are mine,
my role,
only *I* know.

[3] Suddenly
being trusted with things,
the only one who could answer.

[4] I had to sit up and listen;
now I feel like
Oh
I'm listened to.

[5] My input is valuable,
Talking and contributing.
I know I can participate.

In this poem, Aya discusses finding her voice, and feeling that she is listened to, feeling that her knowledge is valuable and credible. Again, the idea of roles comes up, and this time it gives her confidence, and motivates her to listen. In stanza 1, she is finding a place within the TP, which enables her to have a voice. She states (stanza 2) that being given a role to play enabled her to find her place. Feeling like she was trusted and listened to in her unique role, as shown in stanzas 3 and 4, also enabled her to find her place and feel that she could participate more meaningfully than when she first came into the space. However, there is still a sense that there is an authoritative figure giving her this new role.

Poem 4 **Spaces where there's no space**

[1] Sometimes others are overpowering
in spaces where there's no space
for other people to engage.

[2] When you say your ideas they listen,
but then they're just like, '*Okay, but…*'
then just move on
to another.

[3] Most places
where I felt like I'm not participating
nobody responded,
nobody even acknowledging who you are.

[4] I feel like
in those instances
people are silently selecting
who participates,
and who doesn't,
according to your importance
and relevance

in those spaces where there's no space.

The poem is also about feeling silenced by a lack of recognition by others in the space. Aya feels dismissed by other people who tend to overpower the space and deny others a chance to speak (stanza 1). In stanza 2 she talks about the tokenism of others by allowing them to speak, but not necessarily taking their contributions forward, in a way dismissing them with a phase like "*okay, but*…", which completely negates/disregards what was said; feeling that the space is closed, and not open to new contributions. The lack of recognition and acknowledgement is also discussed in the 3rd stanza, where Aya felt that she was not participating when she was completely ignored by others in the space. This (stanza 3) is an experience from a stakeholder meeting hosted by the municipality within the Tsitsa River catchment area that she had attended as a TP representative. In stanza 4, Aya explains that the overpowering and the dismissing of other voices, the lack of acknowledgement, and ignoring of others are all acts of silencing certain voices while selecting which voices count.

Poem 5 **I don't talk, I just do**

[1] I don't participate for the sake of it,
my morals won't let me.

[2] I choose when to participate:
If I feel like I'm going to make a difference,
whether you hear me or use my input,
but there's a chance it could make a difference:
that's my motivation.
It has to have a purpose;

[3] and when not to participate:
I don't like talking when you feel like you're going to be judged.
I get easily offended.
I don't like bullies,
people that just always want to be right,
always want to take charge,
are too competitive
and cheating.

[4] I grew up as a very kept to myself kind of person,
never involved myself in anything to do
with talking - it was easier,

not because there were no spaces to participate,
I just chose not to.

[5] My teacher would shout:
"empty vessels make a lot of noise."
I was like *"what is this woman talking about?"*
Now that I'm older, it makes sense,
smart people don't talk much,
but, when they do talk, you're surprised.
So I don't talk.
I just do.

The main theme in this poem is choice. Aya discusses what motivates her choices to participate or not. In stanza 1, she brings in the idea of her morals, or perhaps ethics, having an influence on how she chooses to participate. Then in stanza 2, she explains the statement made in stanza 1 that says*, "I don't participate for the sake of it",* when she states that there must be a purpose and a potential to influence change. The idea of influencing change also surfaced for Aya in an earlier poem. In stanza 3 she describes when not to participate, which it is mainly about other participants' behaviour in the space, those who judge, bullies, and those who like to take charge of the space, or are unhealthily competitive and cheat. Again, Aya reiterates what she brought up in the poem "*space where there is no space*", about the influence of others. In stanza 4, she mentions the issue of growing up as an introvert and that it was easier to show what she could do than to talk, which is what guided her choice of what to take part in. In the last stanza, she reflects on another influencing factor that validated her introverted ways, where she realises that indeed "empty vessels make the most noise", so it is better to keep quiet until she has something productive to say. She ends by asserting the value of action over speaking.

In all, Aya has come a long way in her participation journey, where she came out of her non-talkative shell and developed into a more confident person who speaks and makes a valuable contribution. The behaviour of other participants has quite an impact on her, where non-supportive participants make her feel scared while supportive and encouraging participants enable her to thrive.

4.3.2. Researcher participants' themes

This section presents the researcher participants' framing of participation based on their experiences both within and beyond the TP. The strongly recurring themes from their narratives are: 1) hope and frustration; 2) human connection and finding one's place; 3) recognition; 4) learning and adapting; and 5) other enablers and/or inhibitors of participation, such as time, context, language, overpowering individuals, and personal traits.

1. Hope and frustration

Hope – for various outcomes and ideals – was a dominant theme expressed in the data, as was the closely related theme of frustration. Both hope and frustration were expressed in a number of distinct and interesting ways by members of the research team.

Most researcher participants described their motivation to participate in the TP in the light of an intention or hope of achieving something or making a positive difference. Many researcher participants expressed the hope of using their voice and actions to influence positive change in the spaces in which they decided to spend their valuable time. They spoke about hoping to help as well as about their hope to motivate or inspire others to speak or act towards positive change. Thinking about the goals of their research, they also expressed the hope of being able to listen, understand, and make a positive impact on the lives of the people they encountered during the research. In addition, through their different positions in society, researcher participants hoped that they could highlight the voices of the less powerful in spaces where they themselves felt influential; that is, in spaces where they felt they had a voice. In Tom's words:

> *"People just seemed to have no power;*
> *I was interested in trying to figure out,*
> *what mechanisms were available*
> *to get power for them to engage with formal governance;*
> *I thought that the Tsitsa Project was looking at that."*

Similarly, Aya said,

> *"you feel like,*
> *I have a chance to be influential somehow,*
> *like communities are not shut out,*
> *completely."*

It would also seem that sometimes to achieve some of the altruism that the participants hoped for, it was important to know the right channels to follow, such as who to talk to or who to liaise with – Anna, for instance, hoped to change the world someday through connecting people and their natural environment as a high school student, and realised that she needed to speak to her school management first, who then helped her organise other 'stakeholders' who could potentially help her realise her dream to start a wildlife society. According to Anna's (participant 12) poem 2 (Section 4.3.1), she ended up being part of a very influential process in South Africa, developing a new water law, and this early experience as a student might have influenced her to want to strike a balance between protecting the environment while ensuring social justice – she was still full of hope. When Tom joined the TP, he had big hopes of finding out what mechanisms were available to get the voices of his powerless protesting community into mainstream governance. Evidently, the participants have highlighted that some of the hopes and desires require one to team up or partner up with other people (who hold a certain power) to make things happen.

Hope was also expressed as "a leap of faith". Kathy noted, for instance, that there is no way to track or determine how much impact a project like the TP actually has on the people it is intended to reach while the project is happening. She further notes that it is impossible to know who goes on to talk to other members of the community about the work. Given this, she describes the team as taking a leap of faith and hoping that the outcomes of the work will spread, and lead to positive change. In her words:

> *"We don't have trackers on them.*
> *We don't know how many other people they are speaking to.*
> *that's very difficult to track;*
>
> *some of it is like hope,*
>
> *and we just keep doing it*
> *hoping that maybe*
> *someday*
> *things will change."*

Nonetheless, some researcher participants felt that they entered participatory spaces with unrealistic expectations of what was possible, which in turn led to disillusionment when reality hit. In other words, the researcher participants were sometimes met with frustrations

and disappointments regarding their expectations in comparison to the realities of the spaces they encountered. As is evident from most of the narratives, researcher participants usually had their own goals that they brought to the participatory space. However, they had to face many reality checks when they realised that the space was not necessarily what they expected, leading chiefly to feelings of disappointment, frustration, or even failure in some cases. The adage, 'do not judge a book by its cover', may be relevant here, as for most researcher participants, effective participation required that they take the time to learn and understand what they had 'signed up for'.

In a similar vein, hope was also found to be related to what might, perhaps uncharitably, be described as a 'saviour complex' on the part of certain members of the research team whose words imply that researchers can come in and 'save' a seemingly helpless community. For instance, in Anna's interview, she says: "*we needed to leave behind people who were empowered to act*"—implying that the residents were and would remain disempowered without the intervention of the TP.

While there was hope that participation in governance development research would contribute to empowering resident-participants, there was also frustration at unintended consequences as it seemed resident-participants were actually being exploited. Their participation contributed to research outcomes and student graduations, but their time did not bring them material benefit. This sense of exploitation persisted even when the limitation of the TP for providing material benefits was clear, and that participation might bring benefits related to knowledge and entry-points to influence local decisions. In Anna's words:

> *"when we participate,*
> *the only people not being paid for their time,*
> *are the people who give us the data.*
> *It drives me crazy.*
> *It's fundamentally exploitative…"*

The CLOs were paid – only while the project lasted – the question here is how to recompense the residents' time spent participating. This creates a tension concerning how paying the local members of the community might imply that they, and the work, were only tied to the initiative by payment, such that when payment stopped (i.e., once the research was complete), the work would also stop. The tension here exists, then, between not paying

community members and so exploiting them, on the one hand, and paying them and potentially undermining the sustainability of the work, on the other.

Further frustrations were expressed by research participants that can be linked to concerns of tokenism and exploitative research. We might think that tokenism occurs unintentionally in many cases; for instance, when researchers seem comfortable participating in spaces where they can barely understand a word of what certain participants are saying owing to a language barrier between them. However, researcher participants in the TP spoke directly to the sad reality of attempting to contribute in participatory spaces while aware that the people they were trying to speak to could not understand them. They describe feeling helpless to confront the situation or turn the situation around. Anna, in her interview with me, made the following remark:

> *[3] I didn't flag language as critical,*
> *until you[9] came,*
> *and named it;*
> *all of a sudden, your question*
> *allowed me to acknowledge a discomfort*
> *I had covered up,*
> *it was too uncomfortable.*

In this instance, Anna had lacked the words to describe her discomfort, which to frustrations in achieving some of the impact she had hoped to make through her voice. The lack of language potentially also denied her audience the ability to fully express themselves as they could not comprehend what their speaker was saying. In response to this new discovery, "learning words" workshops were conducted in the Tsitsa Catchment to get the researchers and the residents on the same page in terms of vocabulary.

2. Human connection and finding one's place

Human connection was another dominant theme emerging from the researcher participants' data. In speaking to this theme, researcher participants typically referred to being part of a team working towards a common purpose as a basis for human connection. As Aya said:

> *"…*

[9] Anna is referring to learning the concept of epistemic injustice through my Master's research, and how before then she had not flagged the recognition that people had not understood much of what she was saying when conducting the workshops in English, when many did not speak or understand the language.

be part of the team.

[2] Sports;
big way that you feel like you're participating,
every person has a role to play,
you're all working
towards the same goal."

Researcher participants also highlighted that recognising both differences and commonalities among themselves and other people within a participatory space provided opportunities to connect with those people, especially new people in the team or the space they participated in. Engaging with others with similar interests was seen to foster human connection, which was considered to play an important role in developing networks. The ability to develop networks and relationships was further emphasised in reflections of how these researcher participants had benefited from making such connections in the past, from being called upon to participate in interesting and prestigious activities to developing general friendships.

Connecting with others in the participatory space played a vital role for researcher participants, such that it was also mentioned in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic which required that the team interact remotely (mainly online) for two years of the project. The pandemic, it was noted, deprived participants of the opportunity to make personal connections beyond the formal working space. In this regard, face-to-face interactions were seen as more valuable than online interactions. For instance, in Aya's words:

"We underestimate the power of shared spaces,
learning from each other,
engaging people you'd not have
engaged on a normal day.
It's not so difficult in person.
It's nice to interact,
especially if you meet new people.

Now that everything's online,
you lose concentration easily."

Researcher participants drew together the idea of being part of a team with trusting and being trusted by the team. The idea of trusting one's team was mainly drawn on when researcher participants were part of the initiating team of a participatory activity, in which

case researcher participants spoke about how trusting their team enabled them to refrain from dominating the space or other participants. In Louisa's words:

> *"It's critical that,*
> *whoever you're working with,*
> *you realign yourselves beforehand.*
> *If there is trust between the facilitator and yourself,*
> *as a non-local-language-speaking person,*
> *it can work….*
> *You let control go.*
> *You're getting the essence of what's happening."*

Again, in the words of Anna:

> *"The team is better at uncovering diversity,*
> *allowing it to come out.*
> *Listening to them*
> *changed practice,*
> *changed participation,*
> *helped me let go."*

Trust played a fundamental role in Anna's narrative – learning to trust the team and let go of control of the process and the space, and respect it as it unfolded, enabled Anna to experience a significant shift in participation – as she let go of control, she enabled greater participation from others. In her words:

> *"I wasn't talking at people*
> *(…)*
> *That change in practice, changed participation."*

In addition to trust, the researcher participants also spoke about a sense of safety and support that one experiences as a member of such a team, which led to increasing feelings of comfort and confidence. Aya, for instance, argued that the:

> *"…TP brings everybody together*
> *we push each other.*
> *That support structure,*
> *people rooting for you,*
> *it's easy to be your true self…*
> *to reach your potential*
> *or even build towards it…*

open up."

Kathy also alluded to the same point but phrased it in a way that circled back to trust. In her words:

> *"People started feeling comfortable.*
> *It was really nice to know that*
> *we all had each other's backs."*

Connecting team work to trust, safety, support, and confidence further emphasises the importance and value placed on human connection in participatory spaces for and by researcher participants. Human connection as an essential mechanism to foster epistemic justice has also come up in many other narratives. For instance, connecting with other people in the participatory process enabled the research participants to develop the tools to transform some of their assumptions about residents. Listening carefully to what other people say allows you to connect with them at a deeper level, which then allows you to approach them in ways that are more relatable to them, including your use of language.

In a related vein, the idea of a common purpose emerged from researcher participants' narratives. Some participants felt it was important for the team to have a common purpose in the participatory space so that it could lead to successful outcomes instead of failure. Anna spoke about experiencing platforms where being adamant to hold on to individual interests rather than the common purpose led to irreversible negative consequences that nobody benefitted from. And Kathy spoke about starting out on quite opposite sides of a discussion, and gradually moving towards common goals, which led to successes.

A closely related theme to human connection was that of finding one's place in the team and/or participatory space, with most researcher participants noting how finding their place enabled greater participation.

Researcher participants highlighted the fact that people in participatory spaces not only differ individually but also play different roles that are all valuable to the team. Given this recognition, they spoke about having to find their place or unique role in the team and/or spaces in which they participated. Moreover, participants noted that when entering a new space, it was important to learn about the purpose of the space and connect with those

already in the space to determine how they fitted in or to find their place. For instance, Kathy reflected that when she joined a particular team:

> *"They had worked together*
> *for years,*
> *quite set on the ways that they worked.*
> *I arrived with a different way of thinking.*
>
> *I don't want to say your system is wrong or right,*
> *but I want to understand how it works,*
> *and can we possibly work on tweaking some things?"*

Kathy's passage in some way shows the negotiation that goes into the process of finding one's place in a new space. Another thing that the passage above shows is how gently Kathy eases herself into the space, to say, first listening to those occupying the space, then introducing herself.

Some participants spoke about experiences where the opportunity to speak was available to them in a space, but they did not take it up because they had not (yet) found this sense of place within the team and/or participatory space; and so, did not yet feel able to speak, confident in the thought that what they were saying would be considered valuable by others within the space. For instance, Louisa reflected as follows:

> *"In the TP's internal discussions,*
> *most of us have found ourselves in that place;*
> *we're able to express ourselves freely,*
> *even when we are taking the back seat,*
> *we're given enough opportunity."*

And Aya:

> *"I was just there, no participation;*
> *not that it wasn't allowed,*
> *it wasn't the right time*
> *or the platform."*

Other research participants also spoke to the difficulty of finding a place. In Tom's words:

> *"I was disillusioned;*
> *the fuzzy relationships,*
> *very little interaction,*

disconnected…
massive disconnect.
Different groups
doing their own thing.

I struggled to find a place."

In essence, 'finding a place' within a team and/or participatory space emerges as something that enables participation on the part of researcher participants. However, joining a participatory activity at a later stage, when it is already occupied by other people who have conceptualised many of its goals, typically meant fitting one's own goals and role within existing boundaries. Part of the narrative here seems to point to the fact that participation could also result in self-discovery, in terms of how it seems to change and shift based not only on trying to fit in, but also the new characteristics that one discovers about themselves through their different interactions with others.

3. Recognition

The ability to find effective ways to express one's voice or to be heard, or to be functionally valued, and thereby becoming recognised by others as having something valuable to contribute, was of central importance in researcher participants' narratives. Researcher participants expressed the connection between being recognised and being heard when they spoke. In Aya's words:

"given things to do that are mine,
my role,
only I know.

Suddenly
being trusted with things,
the only one who could answer.

I had to sit up and listen;
now I feel like
Oh
I'm listened to."

In contrast to the resident participants who describe feeling as if they had less power to speak freely in the TP (mainly in the earlier days), researcher participants mostly expressed an ability

to speak freely, confident in the belief that what they contributed would be impactful. These two contrasting positions did, however, emerge from discussions based at different levels of engagement; while residents were referring to their engagements with researchers, researchers were often referring to internal engagements among the research team itself. This experience was not universal among researcher participants many of whom described themselves as shy. Confidence, that is, also emerged alongside shyness in many of the participants' narratives, with Louisa and Anna explicitly describing themselves as shy at particular stages of their participatory lives. Aya did not use the word 'shy' but did describe feeling much like Louisa did in participatory spaces – namely, uncomfortable speaking. In her words:

> *"People who talk*
> *in these spaces*
> *are the most confident."*

Researcher participants also described experiencing recognition as making them feel valued for their contribution to the space. Recognition was even noted by researcher participants as a highlight or benefit of participation. Kathy, for instance, said:

> *"We did a presentation;*
> *people went,*
> *'ha, okay,*
> *we've heard what you've said,*
> *and that made sense.*
>
> *That definitely was a highlight,*
> *I suppose, recognition in a way,*
> *A verbal acknowledgement*
> *in spaces like that."*

Particular emphasis was sometimes placed on recognition from those whom these participants felt were powerful in the space, such as the prominent scientists in Kathy's case. She refers to *a verbal acknowledgement in spaces like that*, referring to the academic space, which, as evident from many narratives, was not always welcoming of new voices or kinds of knowledge. The experience of recognition improved Kathy's epistemic confidence.

While, on the one hand, recognition emerged as boosting participants' confidence in participating and desire to participate, a lack of recognition or acknowledgement emerged as

silencing participation. A lack of recognition was connected to negative associations with activities where participants felt that they had been shut out of the space or silenced. The descriptions of these experiences also had an element of exploitation to them, with some researcher participants describing feeling vulnerable and unsafe around people who seemed to thrive on their ideas while leaving them behind. In another instance, a researcher participant described a lack of acknowledgement of her presence in an activity (not in the TP) as leading her to feel as though she was being silently denied the platform to participate by those coordinating or facilitating the space. As Aya remarked:

> *"Most places*
> *where I felt like I'm not participating*
> *nobody responded,*
> *nobody even acknowledging who you are.*
>
> *I feel like*
> *in those instances*
> *people are silently selecting*
> *who participates,*
> *and who doesn't,*
> *according to your importance*
> *and relevance*
>
> *in those spaces where there's no space."*

Yet another participant in this group picked up on this theme, noting that it felt that the recognition given to her in some spaces was a bit superficial, or not real. As Kathy said:

> *"I've certainly been in meetings where you feel uncomfortable.*
> *The person running the meeting is trying to be kind*
> *but underlying that is this tension of*
> *'there are foreign-speaking people in our midst.'"*

Relatedly, research participants spoke about recognising their own shortcomings when it came to effectively making their contributions in certain spaces; where, for instance, other people did not appear to understand their point, or they were using inaccessible language. As Kathy stated:

> *"But I speak in a way most don't understand.*
> *They give that sort of blank nod,*
> *taking notes.*

You know that they haven't understood a word.
I made it clear that I was aware;
that helped them begin to feel comfortable."

They suggested that knowing and acknowledging one's shortcomings forms a good foundation for accepting other people's feedback without lowering one's confidence. Interestingly, one of the shortcomings discussed at length by researcher participants was shyness – and, in particular, how feeling shy presented obstacles to contributing in the space. In this regard, Louisa shared an interesting coping strategy when she felt too shy to speak in open discussions. She would wait for smaller group discussions or break time to discuss her ideas in more informal settings with friends or colleagues, whom she hoped would share these ideas when they returned to the bigger group setting.

Finally, the theme of recognition also emerged in this group under recognising the different interests and roles that are represented within the participatory space, which in turn emerged as enhancing the chance of participants' recognising the different contributions that were made in the space. In this vein, one participant expressed her surprise at how people's perceptions quickly change with changing roles, leading them to treat individuals differently, such as giving them more credibility and more epistemic authority In Kathy's words:

"It's so strange how roles,
and the associated authority,
change people's perception of who you are,
and how you behave,
even if you don't think you've changed.

There's almost an expectation
that in a particular role,
you'll know or understand certain things:
suddenly I might be
the voice of authority."

For some participants, the idea of changing roles and changing perceptions increased the confidence that these participants had in themselves when entrusted with certain responsibilities. Such as Aya (Participant 13) in her poem 3 titled 'Slowly, I have started to have a voice', where she gradually started to have a voice because her new role came with responsibilities that made her the only person who could answer certain questions. The trust placed in her in the role gave her confidence to feel like she could speak and be listened to.

Researcher participants described participation as involving conversation and gaining and sharing ideas in positive terms. For example, Tom said: "*I loved the idea space, and the thinking and the challenging.*" In speaking to this 'idea space', participation in the form of conversation was also described as a democratic process where all present should feel able to freely and respectfully express their ideas and be heard. Researcher participants believed that engaging in such conversations allowed resident, implementing, and government participants to gain a better understanding of what was being discussed, which relates to the substantive rationale of participation, where the goal of involving more voices is to improve outcomes. Furthermore, it revealed that building the kinds of spaces in which these kinds of talks may take place consists of being inclusive of all parties concerned, particularly of resident voices in the area, which play such a crucial role in forming a picture of the local context.

In Kathy's words:

> *"If we allow the space for conversation,*
> *you start getting a much better picture.*
> *You can't just parachute in, and hope."*

Participation is described by these research participants in terms of reciprocal communication between or among all the parties involved; that is, as a two-way street requiring a balance to be found between the facilitator and the other participants. This means that the facilitator has to create an enabling environment to allow all those who are present to contribute without feeling either intimidated or excluded in any way. One of the mechanisms that the researcher participants mentioned was learning their contexts, to get an understanding of the local social dynamics that guide participation (to be further described in the following section). Sadly, most of the researcher participants spoke of experiencing their fair share of exclusion through their journeys of participation.

4. Learning and adapting

One of the prominent themes in this stakeholder category was learning from different experiences, and in turn adapting in different ways, whether in thinking or acting. Adapting is linked to learning insofar as it takes learning for a shift to happen, as will be discussed with reference to Kato (2008) and Ison (2010).

The theme of 'finding a place', discussed earlier under human connection, relates to this theme. Most of the adaptations referred to by the researcher participants required them to first enter a participatory space, which usually meant having hopes and expectations about what the space could achieve, then being open to learning to understand the space, and finding a place in it. Recall that when participants entered new and already occupied spaces, they felt as though they had to start by holding back a little while they observed and tried to figure out what role to play or how to fit in. The researcher participants found this holding back useful in allowing them to make their way in slowly, and find a way to be able to contribute, until they secured a bigger role or responsibility within the team. This sometimes meant adapting their initial thoughts or actions to those that aligned with the space that they were in. As Tom put it:

> *"I've had to adapt my expectations*
> *to some extent, letting go*
> *of some of my idealism.*
>
> *Having done that*
> *I understand,*
> *which makes it easier*
> *to see value in the way things are done."*

Over time, Tom came to realise that the research intensiveness of the TP was necessary for achieving its bigger goals.

Learning and adapting, then, emerged as playing a vital role in finding a place and a role, and was described as requiring connections with other people. The researcher participants were quite reflexive in some of the ways in which they engaged in this regard, which allowed them to learn from their different experiences and adapt moving forward. Aya spoke about needing to learn different ways of being with others in order to enable participation. In her words:

> *"You build confidence over time...*
> *Learning the different mannerisms,*
> *how to behave in certain spaces,*
> *I can't be the standard myself everywhere."*

Participants also referred to having experienced some people or events that led to a shift in their practice. Anna's narrative, for instance, focused extensively on the theme of learning and adapting as a result of different experiences of participation. She spoke about how

engaging with different people enabled her to learn new concepts that helped her to name and contextualise some of the decisions she had made; words such as complexity, transdisciplinarity, epistemic injustice, and engaged research. In her narrative, she describes finding these concepts useful in both her intellectual and advocacy work.

Being reflexive formed a significant part of learning and adapting, and has been documented in different contexts where people engage in exchanging ideas. The researcher participants all seemed to agree or be aware that things would not always go as planned, and this awareness enabled them to be open to learning as they went along. According to Kathy:

> *"It's about accepting*
> *that it won't necessarily go*
> *the way you wanted it to go,*
> *and that's okay."*

This learning-as-we-go approach also speaks to learning from different experiences, and allowed the researcher participants to be more critical of themselves and others, as well as more open to being on the receiving end of criticism. In Anna's words:

> *"After workshops we reflect.*
> *Sometimes*
> *people have voiced discomfort:*
> *"did you notice some of the less-good things?"*
> *things I had filtered out*
> *cocooned*
> *with the warm and fuzzy feeling.*
> *Even though*
> *feedback that it's going well*
> *is a big driver,*
> *I really value voices that are more critical."*

The participants' ability to adapt and acquire new skills was essential to enabling them to participate in different spaces. Some of the new knowledge and skills that the participants found useful were observation, which allowed them to read the room and enabled them to participate (Kathy and Louisa); the ability to speak comfortably in front of large crowds (Aya and Louisa); and learning new concepts that enabled participation and understanding (Anna).

Indeed, for most researcher participants, it was evident that their ability and willingness to learn and adapt contributed to positive experiences of participation, which relates back to the idea mentioned before that finding a place enables participation.

6. Context

The researcher participants emphasised the importance of context in their narratives of participation; that is, of being aware and respectful of the dynamics of the space that one is participating in. Some researcher participants discussed learning the rules and norms of a participatory space and respecting them, as the rules offer a boundary within which participants can freely participate, even in new and unfamiliar contexts. For example, Kathy said:

> *"If I am in someone else's space,*
> *(which I always am in the Tsitsa),*
> *I need to respect the rules.*
> *I might not agree,*
> *but I am just a visitor."*

In addition, Louisa also said:

> *"As the person trying to facilitate,*
> *you should be aware of who the participants are;*
> *you might know the context,*
> *but not the dynamic –*
> *that takes a while.*
> *You got to draw on tools and approaches*
> *that give people opportunities."*

It is important to understand the context in which the participatory space is facilitated, because different forms of participation are guided by different rules. Researcher participants recalled some defining moments where they had acted in ways that they were used to, but that were not necessarily received positively. For instance, Louisa describes an example of holding a workshop with a few young women whose voices she was interested in hearing:

> *"I decided, well, let's have a small group with the young women? Oh my God, it created a big tension with the elder women because they thought there were some reasons behind; I was questioned, why are you separating these women? I explained that because I was just interested to hear from them and that was cleared, but initially as I said now, it was suspicious because it was not done regularly."*

The passage above shows that the culture of participation in an area matters in terms of who is expected to speak, when and how to play an influential role in promoting participation. Another aspect is that learning the social dynamics of a new context requires adopting strategic approaches to get the people to explain some of these social rules and norms such as in Louisa's case. Essentially the TP with its learning-by-doing approach allowed them to make necessary arrangements such as starting engagements with a song and prayer, and having an elder make opening and closing remarks. Recall that some participants (Kathy and Louisa) mentioned developing coping strategies like observation skills for those instances when translation was limited. These cases describe the relevance of adapting one's approach to suit one's context, and were alluded to in the different experiences of the researcher participants. In this way, understanding one's context is closely linked to learning and adapting, which emerged as important aspects of participation, as described earlier.

Another interesting sub-theme that emerged in relation to understanding one's context was a tension that Kathy alluded to regarding her experiences as a white woman in different contexts. She described feeling like she was more respected in predominantly black spaces than she had observed black people being treated in predominantly white spaces. Her presence, she said, would be acknowledged and sometimes a person was even assigned to sit with her to translate the proceedings if no prior arrangements to translate had been incorporated into the agenda. Kathy remarked:

> [3]*"I remember one meeting in particular,*
> *he looked at me and he waved,*
> *you're the only one here that's white and speaks English,*
> *she's going to have to translate to you.*
> *Very often*
> *in those spaces,*
> *I was more respected*
> *than in the reverse situation,*
> *in a space with more white people than black people,*
> *they're not as respected as I felt in those spaces.*
> *There's no acknowledgement*
> *that there might be a language barrier"*

A similar notion was hinted at in Tom's narrative where he showed his awareness of the power that comes with being "*different and an outsider"—*"*you can kind of create depth with special-ness*". However, Kathy did also mention other predominantly black spaces where the

calling out felt more to her like being put on the spot than a genuine welcoming into the space, or as she phrased it, "*being tolerated*." Other points also emerged that suggested that in predominantly white spaces, there was no formal acknowledgement that there may be people in the room who could not understand what was being said. The thought emerging here is that there is often an assumption that everyone who attends understands English. The concern that predominantly white spaces do not pay much attention to the presence of people who might not understand the discussions was further alluded to by Anna, who said:

> *"I wouldn't have said I was exercising power,*
> *up to that moment;*
> *I would've thought I was being sensitive,*
> *and helpful, but I was running it the way*
> *I knew how to run it."*

Anna's lack of awareness relates to white ignorance (Vice, 2021), where the white person (Anna) is unable to relate her experiences in relation to racialisation, which in turn hurts black underprivileged people (resident participants) who tend to suffer the practical consequences of this ignorance - such as an inability to determine their destinies since they could not follow the discussion. As will be addressed in the discussion with reference to Medina (2012; 2017), black underprivileged people have been forced to make sense of two worlds, that of the white people and that of their people, which essentially renders them epistemically privileged as they have developed hermeneutical sensitivities for both worlds. However, they cannot necessarily enjoy that privilege because the powerful white person still has the upper hand with their limited comprehension of this whole other world that they created. In this way, white ignorance needs to be corrected, where white people become more aware and explicit about the effects of racial segregation and the legacy it bears on them in terms of both giving them authority over others and yet taking it away in other instances. They need to come to terms with the obscured experiences, which could be what Tom, the student, may have become aware of, and brought to Anna's attention, who also got to learn the painful reality of her privilege. Tom was indeed aware of this privilege as he remarked:

> *"If Phiwe goes to visit,*
> *it's maybe not a big deal,*
> *but it's like, I'm there,*
> *maybe Anna is there;*
> *you can create depth with specialness."*

Tom's awareness has allowed him to develop some epistemic virtue as evident in one resident participant's narrative (Nkosi, Participant 3, Poem 2) where he described how Tom encouraged them to speak, and to be part of the decision-making, even when they have doubts about their abilities. Maybe the explicit awareness of researcher participants' position of power as white people could be a way to remedy some of the epistemic injustices in the participatory space.

8. Enablers and/or inhibitors: time; language; overpowering individuals; and personal traits

Finally, let us turn our attention to some of the other enablers and/or inhibitors of participation emerging from the narratives of researcher participants. Participants referred to these different factors in positive ways in some instances, and in negative ways in others. These include: time; language; overpowering individuals; and personal traits.

Time

Research participants felt that participation involves investing one's time, which must in turn lead to some form of benefit or reward. While some participants, such as Tom, spoke about feeling that their time was well spent engaging in certain participatory activities — *"I felt okay spending my time doing it"*— others felt as though their time was sometimes wasted. For instance, in Kathy's words:

> *"those meetings where I felt like,*
> *this is rubbish;*
> *nothing is going to change.*
> *I just spent an hour driving here,*
> *I'm bored out of my head;*
> *I could be doing 10 other things."*

Given that participation requires investing one's time, participants explained that their choices in what to participate in were driven by their values. For instance, Aya said:

> *"At this age,*
> *I don't participate for the sake of it,*
> *my morals won't let me;*
> *(…)*
> *It has to have a purpose."*

Time is of essence for the participants in this category, for both efficiency and moral reasons.

Language

Language played a role in the researcher participants' experiences of participation. Some participants described struggles with freely and comfortably expressing themselves in certain spaces as the result of issues with language. For researcher participants, such as Louisa, Aya and Anna, exclusion was predominantly felt to be the result of language issues. The issue of a language barrier emerged in a number of different instances, ranging from how other participants could not contribute much because the meeting was conducted in a language they did not know without much translation, to feeling lost because the subject of discussion was unfamiliar, to people speaking too fast. For instance, Louisa experienced language issues in her school days when she had moved to another country, with English as a second language for her. Aya too struggled a little bit when she first entered the TP space due to the majority being white people, for whom English was their first language, and so they spoke fast, making accent more of an issue than her proficiency in English. Anna commented:

> *"I sat in a meeting that I didn't understand,*
> *I was excluded,*
> *I got bored*
> *my concentration wandered,*
> *I felt,*
> *what the hell am I doing for all these hours?"*

In the stanza above, Anna could relate to the fellow residents who have spent even more hours in TP meetings being conducted primarily in English, with many of them not able to fully engage in the discussion due to the language barrier. It is notable that researcher participants often felt like they could still contribute if they wanted to in some instances, even though they had no command of the local language being used to facilitate the engagement. For instance, Louisa and Kathy learning to follow discussions held in a language other than English through observations indicate knowing that they could ask for clarifications at any point. This suggests a sense of epistemic authority that stands in contrast to occasions described from her younger days by Louisa, where a lack of language command was described as depriving her of the ability to engage much with other people.

Perhaps it is in this vein that some researcher participants did not view the lack of language command as much of a problem. Instead, they took it as opportunity to learn to observe body language and other observable forms of communication. However, this suggests that their engagement became quite shallow as on top of not being body language experts, they did not possess even the most basic knowledge of the language from which to infer meaning, which therefore interfered with their desire to foster connection with others.

Overpowering individuals

For some researcher participants, their experiences of participation were greatly influenced by how others within the participatory space treated those around them. For instance, there were times when participants had been involved in spaces where they had felt either ignored or unappreciated for their contribution, which in turn made them feel like they were being silenced, or that recognition of their contribution was tokenistic; pretending to be welcoming when it was not genuine. For instance, in Aya's words:

> *"Sometimes others are overpowering*
> *in spaces where there's no space*
> *for other people to engage.*
>
> *When you say your ideas they listen,*
> *but then they're just like, 'Okay, but…'*
> *then just move on*
> *to another."*

Or in Kathy's:

> *"I've certainly been in meetings where you feel uncomfortable.*
> *The person running the meeting is trying to be kind*
> *but underlying that is this tension of*
> *'there are foreign-speaking people in our midst.'"*

In both quotes, the participants were recognised, but the recognition received did not feel genuine to them, constituting tokenistic behaviour, another dominant factor among the participants that seemed to dismiss their contributions. Aya's comment also shows factors that contribute to certain types of knowledge being dismissed from general knowledge creation, which will be discussed in terms of defeating the normative purpose of participation that speaks to citizens influencing decisions by expressing their voices (Buuren, Meerkerk and Tortajada, 2019).

Participants also described experiencing spaces that were dominated by certain people when they first arrived as occupied space. They speak about 'experts' who are set in their ways and not receptive to new ideas. Some participants found these individuals frustrating, while others felt intimidated by them. Referring to the TP, Louisa remarked:

> *"It's a little intimidating,*
> *being in an environment*
> *populated by those hardcore strong scientists.*
> *They have lots of experience."*

The image of the intimidating, hardcore scientist is relevant here given that the natural resource management (NRM) space was occupied by them for the longest time (Holmes-Watts and Watts, 2008), which means that this could be the experience of most people who are new to these spaces and hold quite different ideas. In the presence of individuals who dominate the space, new voices typically felt intimidated or ignored. That this is so, is fascinating in light of the senior researchers' desires to create an enabling space and supportive team environment, as discussed earlier.

Personal traits

Finally, researcher participants made numerous references to family influence on their choice to participate in the TP, such as interests or career choices being related to those of parents, or being an only child, or the first-born. These factors show how complex participatory behaviour may be in some instances; where certain choices are rooted in such personal reasons, for instance, may never really be known to others involved in short-term engagements. Such dynamics, which play an influential role in some people's participation, may only be revealed through connecting with them at a more personal level. This presents a challenge for NRM managers when it comes to the multiple stakeholders who are required to make decisions together.

4.4. Implementing Agents

The government department (DFFE) contracted implementing agents in two roles. Some implementing agents managed the on-the-ground physical restoration activities that were part of the public works programme. One was assigned to the TP and linked closely to the works of the CLOs in collaborative governance development, the appointment of eco-rangers and in the emergence of livelihood enterprises like growing vetiver grass.

4.4.1. Implementing agent participants' poems

Participant 14: Jack (6 poems)

Jack works for one of the implementing agencies (LIMA) that work with the TP. He was primarily based in another catchment within the Eastern Cape, but was an integral part of the TP working closely with the senior social facilitator who was placed within the Tsitsa River catchment. He was available to attend workshops and meetings where LIMA was concerned.

Poem 1 **Finding a place within the space**

[1] There are a number
of different moving parts
to achieve a certain goal;
that's what participation is.

[2] Like a piece of the puzzle
or a link in a chain,
forming part of the bigger narrative,
inclusive of every partner (some may not be that active)
those kinds of relationships are important.

[3] Sports and societies
made me feel like part of the community,
an opportunity to learn new things.
I met some cool people,
created networks
that might not have been possible
without those opportunities.
I have a very unlikely best friend,
quite different from me in style,
but we connected
through one of the university activities.

[4] Effective engagement with the communities,
good relationships with traditional leadership,
incorporating local perspectives into decisions,
working groups that are made up of local people:
people on the ground that can be trusted.

[5] The Tsitsa Project
is made up of different stakeholders.
Some facilitate community engagement,
some provide local knowledge
and understanding of the system;
there are different levels of participation.

[6] Participation should not be a one-way thing.
not only those who initiate
need to make an effort.
Effort from all involved
is needed to make it work.

[7] It is hard to enter an already occupied space.
Finding a place in an occupied space…
you come in with certain expectations,
but the other team does not give you the opportunity.
It creates some tension.
They expect you to follow their lead,
which is unfair.

[8] You are expected to take a backseat,
which is disappointing.
Some suggestions from the new guys
get shut down
because what do they know?
The other team was there longer,
they know the context better,
what works and what doesn't.

[9] Having your suggestions shut down is frustrating,
because that is what you know.
Now you are told that is not how things are done.
You end up slacking in your tasks,
and get blamed for it,
which is unfair.

[10] Out of the pandemic,
relationships have blossomed.

Teams settled in better;
the misunderstandings at the start
were a sign of new teams finding a place
within the space:
they finally landed.

In this poem, Jack highlights the need for teamwork, and being inclusive of everyone, like parts of a machine or pieces in a puzzle, each person has a role to play in achieving the bigger goal. In stanza 1, he defines participation in terms of many moving parts, different, and working towards a similar goal, which refers to many people with different skills and roles, but all working towards a similar goal. Recognition of all voices is seen in stanzas 2 and 3. In stanza 3, he speaks about being part of a community and connecting with people with similar interests as his, all due to taking part in sports and societies at university. Experiences such as these earlier university times are pivotal in participants' journey of participation as they have, in a way, allowed people like Jack to be open to people who may seem different from them. The friend he is referring to here he described in his narrative as a hippie, whereas he described himself as a music nerd in Poem 4, which is an unlikely bond, since they moved in different social circles.

In stanza 4, he talks about the TP and the roles played by the different players at different levels of participation. He views participation as a bi-directional effort, where all parties involved need to make it a success (stanza 5). He also talks about being a new person joining a team; how hard it is to find a place because those who already occupy the space expect to lead, which may create tensions for the newcomers (stanza 6). In stanza 7 he expresses the frustration of being expected to take a backseat while those who came first steer the ship, and in the process dismiss the ideas that come from the newcomers. In stanza 8, he mentions that being dismissed as a new person in the space ends up slowing down the new guys in performing their roles.

They finally landed in stanza 9, and found their place within the TP through the Covid-19 pandemic. His initial TP experience was his team finding the space already occupied by the researchers, who were not open to Jack's team's ideas at first, until the Covid-19 pandemic hit, and forced them to create space for them. So, recognition of roles was a pathway to the inclusion of more voices. So far, Jack is the only participant who saw a silver lining to the cloud of Covid-19 because Louisa felt that it created more pressure and stress for people to think

about a response and had to fiddle with a computer to raise your hand and speak, while Aya felt that it undermined the human connection required to make participation work.

Poem 2 Learning from experienced people

[1] Sharing knowledge and information,
the opportunity to report,
to get expert advice that I can trust,
to learn from experienced people,
is a huge advantage.
Opportunities are shared.

Jack here talks about the value of learning from other people in the participatory space, and the idea of trusted experts with great experience.

Poem 3 Inclusive

[1] How do you maintain effective participation?
You can't always make everyone happy;
some people will not get what they want.

[2] One of the biggest challenges in participation
is making sure everyone is participating,
everyone understands,
everyone is heard.

[3] But everyone's views are important.
If a decision has to be made,
explain why this decision
was better than the other one.

[4] A decision or outcome
from that participation
is based on everyone's beliefs and understanding.

In this poem, Jack explains some of the difficulties in trying to be inclusive and ensuring that everyone understands and is understood. In stanzas 1 and 2, he speaks about the struggle of balancing out everyone's interests and voices since it is one of the really difficult things to achieve. He reiterates one of the themes that runs through his poems: the need to be inclusive, by recognising different beliefs and perspectives towards the outcomes or decisions

of a process in stanzas 3 and 4, making it a point to explain why certain choices were made in the end.

Poem 4 **I knew I was going to be overlooked**

[1] We tend to forget about certain groups of people,
sometimes people are overlooked and ignored.

[2] I felt like those nerdy kids were overlooked,
nerdy kids like me were overlooked,

[3] weren't seen
weren't considered for leadership positions

[4]I never applied for any leadership positions
I didn't want to buy into the system

[5]I knew that I was going to be overlooked by the system
anyways.

In this poem, Jack talks about how belonging to a group that is constantly overlooked affects the members, giving an example of deciding to not even try to get involved. In stanza 1, he talks about some groups being overlooked and ignored because they belong to certain communities of society, for instance, 'nerdy kids' (stanza 1) are such a group. They were not recognised and not considered for leadership positions because they were only viewed as members of the nerdy kids, instead of individuals who may possess certain leadership characteristics. This led to them feeling discouraged from even attempting to apply for such for fear of rejection by the system (stanzas 4 and 5).

Poem 5 **Context plays a huge part**

[1] Context plays a huge part
in the effectiveness of participation.

[2] Some people refuse,
or are uncomfortable,
working with traditional leadership;
they prefer political leadership.

[3] There may be places

where that political system works.
It might not work
in the rural contexts
that we work in.

[4] When considering people's lives
within their environment
is not done effectively -
that is tokenistic,

[5] such as placing an advert
about stakeholder consultation
in a newspaper that isn't highly read.
Then nobody shows up,
but they did their job,
they ticked that box.

[6] Effort is needed
to nurture relationships
and trust.

[7] Local dynamics
present a challenge for participation;
they need to be handled with care,
especially when looking to highlight
less powerful voices.

[8] The issue of power disparity
within rural communities,
where one's power over certain resources
- money, agricultural resources, etc. -
buys more opportunities to speak in these spaces.

Here Jack emphasises the importance of being more aware of the local dynamics in order to be conscious about what kind of leadership works, and what the power dynamics are that influence participation. This is similar to Louisa's take on the matter of those local dynamics, and how they facilitate who speaks more on certain topics, and how to use the knowledge to highlight the voices that are often disadvantaged. Jack further explains that ignoring local dynamics results in tokenistic behaviour. In stanzas 2 and 3, he differentiates between

traditional and political leadership, stating an example of traditional leadership possibly being more relevant in rural contexts than in urban places, where the political system may be more influential – traditional leader power resides in collectively owned land and culture and so is often more influential in rural areas. He raises the concept of tokenism in stanza 4, which arises from implementers' failure to successfully engage the people they work with. As an example, stanza 5 shows how this may be demonstrated by creating an advertisement for a participatory activity on a platform that is not widely used in the context. This shows that tokenism in a participatory space can result from a lack of understanding of the relevant context.

Again, in stanza 6, as in his first poem, Jack raises the idea of the effort that is required from all parties to nurture relationships of trust. Understanding the dynamics and context enabled the facilitating team to highlight the usually marginalised voices, further reiterating the importance of understanding one's context as an outsider (stanza 7). He ends the poem by giving an example of how to look out for power dynamics that might exist within rural communities, where, for instance, access to more resources gives one more opportunities and power to speak and be listened to.

Poem 6 **Not homogenous**

[1] Grass.
One might view it as food for their animals,
another sees thatching material for their house.

[2] An important feature,
in a participatory system:
even if they belong to a similar group,
their perspectives
about their environment
are not homogenous.

The idea of being cognisant of the diversity in the room is reiterated here, giving an example of how people's perceptions may differ over a similar resource like grass, even though they belong to the same community or group of society. This idea of recognition also came up in Kathy's narrative.

Participant 15: Phiwe (6 poems)

Phiwe is a community facilitator working for one of the implementing agents. He handles the daily interactions with the local communities with regular visits and responding to the needs of residents regarding the Tsitsa Project. He helps with logistical issues when there are meetings, both face-to-face and online. He is the "go-to" person for researchers who need residents' attendance.

Poem 1 **I saw talent**

[1] When you say sports -
sports is me!
Whether you're good or bad,
no one is going to judge you.
I was not that good.

[2] It's interesting for me
because when we were growing up,
we were so out of luck
we didn't get exposure
to play at a deeper level.

[3] When we had those trials
we would compete against people
with experience.
I'm trying to change that,
coaching from an early age.

[4] You can do it
if you get better coaching
at an early age.
That's why I needed
to groom young people.
I saw talent,
a lot of talent,
in the rural areas.

[5] Here in rural areas,
there is no one who is interested.

Scouters are using GTIs and BMWs:
there's no way they're going to drive
on this type of road.

In this poem, Phiwe discusses his motivation for participation, starting by taking part in sports, and the challenges faced by rural talent, hence his motivation to help young people get the recognition that he feels they deserve. In stanza 1, he raises the issue of lack of judgment and how that can be enabling for people in a participatory space. From stanzas 2 to 4 he adapted his interest from playing to coaching, based on self-awareness and wanting to change the luck of his rural community kids so that they would be better equipped to compete at higher levels than him and his generation. Phiwe has hope for a brighter future for his community through sports, and that is what motivates him to take part. The idea of exposure resonates with Themba's perspective (in poem 4, stanza 6) as he raised it in the case of the bad education system and the lack of exposure to speaking English after learning it as a subject in school.

In stanza 5, he talks about the negative effects of poor services in the rural areas and how rural talent is hidden from recruiters who will not drive their fancy cars on the bad dirt roads. This poem shows the hope that Phiwe has for a positive change within his community.

Poem 2 **We need to set a good example**

[1] There is a certain level
when you realise that
no,
I'm not a player;
I was not that good at playing.

[2] To make things worse
we were four friends.
All three of them were good.
I'm good at coaching.

[3] As we speak,
I run a soccer team.
I also assist a ladies netball team,
though I'm not hands-on;
I sponsor them out of love.

[4] One thing I hate in sports
is fighting;
we need to set a good example
for the young people that we deal with.

[5] It gets frustrating
for the young players
who train hard
only to be let down by an individual.

Phiwe here speaks about being motivated by his passion for sports and identified role as a mentor rather than a player, which relates to the idea of roles that flow throughout all the narratives. In essence, finding a role has allowed Phiwe to participate better.

His focus on sport can be read as metaphor for TP participation. In stanza 1, he continues to share his motivation for mentoring young people in sports, and seems to share their frustrations over being let down by other people. With experience came a certain level of self-awareness, which enabled him to become more comfortable in his favourite activity (sports). In stanza 2, he seems to compare his soccer-playing skills against those of his friends, whom he describes as better that him and explains how that led him to discovering who he was or what his role is in sports (coaching). In the third stanza, he speaks about running a soccer team and even assisting a netball team based on his interest in sports. For him, as evident in stanza 4, it is the duty of older people to be good role models for the young people in order to encourage the young talented people, instead of fighting. As he exclaims at the beginning of stanza 4, he does not like to be involved where there is fighting. Then in stanza 5, he says the reason he hates fighting, especially in sports is that young talented people might become discouraged. Hope for the betterment of his people through sports continues to motivate his participation and being aware of what he is good at seems to have given him the confidence to take part in the different activities.

Poem 3 **Agriculture is life**

[1] People are starting to realise
the benefits of agriculture.

[2] In Xhosa we say,
ubomi

meaning agriculture is life.

[3] It was good to see the youth
attend the meetings;
they don't usually want agriculture,
they associate agriculture with old people.

[4] Growing up with *utata* as a farmer
did influence my career decision.
I did agriculture.

[5] One day I was going to be a farm owner;
we've got the land in the rural areas.

[6] It's good when you practice what you preach;
that was the most memorable thing.

In this poem Phiwe discusses his other motivation, agriculture, and how it came from his family. Again, his role as a mentor for the youth is evident from his happiness to see the youth get involved with agriculture. In stanza 1, he observes that people who had turned away from agriculture are beginning to return owing to the benefits. And in stanza 2 he uses a Xhosa phrase that supports interest in agriculture. In particular, he was impressed by the young people's interest in agriculture since they used to associate it with older people (stanza 3) (which could be the result of increased migration during an era where most men moved to work in mines, leaving a generational gap as the men could not pass down their knowledge of agriculture to their sons; coupled with the provision of grants that allowed people to lose interest in laborious work). In stanza 4, his familiarity with farming from a young age influenced his career decision to do agriculture, and he hopes to become a farmer like his father (utata) one day (stanza 5). His favourite memory is that he lives a life that aligns with his interests.

Poem 4 **To capture attention**

[1]When I worked for the department of Agriculture
I conducted a lot of trainings with farmers.
I trained both young and old.
The training I was doing was more practical.

That's what you want in the rural areas,
and what they want to see.

[2]In the Tsitsa catchment
It seems people like agriculture.
That's why we
establish associations -
so they listen.

[4]What works in the Tsitsa project
is things like maps
that help
to capture attention.

In this poem, Phiwe speaks about context, and awareness of who the audience are in order to find ways to keep them interested. He recalls his experience working for the Department of Agriculture, prior to the TP, where he had learned to capture the attention of people who reside in rural areas, stating more practical activities worked better (stanza 1). This prior experience translates into the TP because, in stanza 2, he talks about the Tsitsa River catchment context, using an example of agriculture as one topic that seems to resonate with many of the residents, which prompted the establishment of associations to catch their attention. In stanza 3, he mentions another thing that is used to capture people's attention in the TP, namely, maps showing people's homes and other localities that usually spark great excitement and break the ice at the start of workshops while waiting for everyone to arrive.

Poem 5 Regular interaction has led to learning

[1] I think it helps
to have someone based in the catchment,
who speaks the local language.

[2] People are able to share,
can comfortably share anything,
they are comfortable to speak
because they speaking in a language
which they are comfortable with.

[3] The project is represented on a regular basis,

having CLOs
who are the bridge
and the face of the project.

The regular interaction has led to learning
about the interests of the communities.

In this poem, Phiwe speaks about the importance of the strategic placement of local language speakers in the TP team, as the community's point of regular contact with the project in opening communication. In stanza 1 he speaks about the implementing agents who stay within the catchment and speak the local language as a helpful strategy. In stanza 2 he suggests that the common language enables the residents to feel comfortable about sharing more information than they would with a foreign-language-speaking person. In the third stanza, he talks about having local people as project representatives, and the way this contributes to the project really understanding the needs of the community. In essence, the ease of communication between the project and the community through this isiXhosa-speaking implementing agent contributed immensely to getting a better understanding of the system, and responding with relevant interventions. This poem suggests that language plays a vital role in building relationships of trust within a project by outsiders and the beneficiary community.

Poem 6 **Engagement is about bringing people in**

[1] One thing I have learned in sports is
there are three results
you should expect.

[2] When I started,
I used to get bitter when I lost,
but now
I have realised:
sport is a game;
you need to put feelings aside
and face reality
because it's about that.

[3] Even if you lose,

it doesn't mean you're a loser.
You just need to prepare yourself again,
try to improve where you've been lacking.

[4] When you start a new project
you need to understand it;
because come to the practical part of things,
you will be surprised.
The Tsitsa project is getting more interesting.
I can see the goal and the mission
of the project;
it aims to leave the land in good health.

[5] When we first entered the Tsitsa space,
there were miscommunications.
That didn't bother me much
because I've been working in different big projects;
when they start,
there are always those misunderstandings.
It didn't affect me that much.

[6] When they said, "working on dongas",
my expectation was that I was going to see bulldozers.
I did not realise that, no,
the bulldozer would only fix for the now;
what is going to happen tomorrow?
I saw value in the research that was done.

[7] For people to participate,
they need to be properly engaged.
Coordination is how you put everything together,
which I think we do so well in the Tsitsa project.
Engagement is about bringing people in,
and explaining what is expected of them.

[8] Without clear information,
people will not participate.
When they do not understand the aim of their participation,
the process is labelled as belonging to someone else,

as people won't feel like they own the space.

In this poem, Phiwe talks about learning how an activity works, which requires one to take some time. His TP experience, just like sports, made him realise that once you have learned about the way your activity works, you are able to adapt your expectations. With adapted expectations comes better ways to participate in that new space.

In stanza 1, he talks about getting into the sports space with an open mind in terms of expectations. He gives his experience in sports, where he learned to stop letting unexpected outcomes of loss get the best of him, but instead took lessons from such losses and prepared better for the next encounter (stanzas 2 and 3). In stanza 4, he uses a sporting metaphor to make sense of his experience in the TP when he stated that, like sports, it is best to lower one's expectations until they are part of it and fully understand what it is about. Through this experience, he was better able to manage his expectations of participatory processes, and the uncertainty of the possible outcomes.

In stanza 5, like Jack, he noticed the bumpy ride of their team when first entering the occupied TP space, but because of previous experiences, he did not let it bother him since it was all part of the task at hand. He obviously came in with some expectations, as is evident in stanza 6, but his openness to learning enabled him to recognise the value in how things were done, even though they were not what he had expected. And so, for Phiwe (stanza 7), it is important to use all the necessary tools to make sure everyone knows what the goals are, and how they are expected to contribute. He finishes in stanza 8 by stating that failure to provide clear information to those being engaged could leave the decision-making in the hands of a few individuals, while others become tokenised.

In all, Phiwe's narrative shows that he was mostly motivated to participate by his passion. His previous experiences enabled him to adapt to the different contexts that he participates in. He managed to survive his time in the TP through his previous experiences in sports and aligning the goals of his work to match his interests.

4.4.2. Implementing agent participants' themes

This section explores implementing agents' framing of participation based on the themes that emerged from their narratives of participation both within and beyond the TP. The central themes for the implementing agents are: 1) human connection; 2) recognition; 3) learning

and adapting; and 4) other enabling and/or inhibiting factors (including self-awareness and language).

1. Human connection

The implementing agents, like the researcher participants, expressed human connection as one of the essential elements of a participatory space. For one, the implementers described participation in terms of being part of a team, with members of a team playing different roles. They used metaphors to reiterate their view of participation, where each member is like a piece in a puzzle, or a part of a bigger narrative. Human connection makes a team function harmoniously towards a common goal. As Jack remarked:

> *[1] There are a number*
> *of different moving parts*
> *to achieve a certain goal;*
> *that's what participation is.*
>
> *[2] Like a piece of the puzzle*
> *or a link in a chain,*
> *forming part of the bigger narrative,*
> *inclusive of every partner (some may not be that active)*
> *those kinds of relationships are important.*

The implementing agents asserted that human connection within a participatory space could be fostered through regular interaction and similar interests. In the TP case, the implementers felt that human connection with the catchment communities was nurtured firstly, by the selection of the members of the community who acted as a bridge between the communities and the TP. The implementers believed that having those different members, such as the community liaison officers (CLOs) allowed the TP team to connect better with the communities and to identify their relevant needs in relation to the vision of the overall project. Secondly, the implementer participants felt that the strategic placement of one of the implementing agents who played the role of a senior facilitator was a good way to maintain good relationships with the communities. The fact that the person who was placed within the catchment was a local-language speaker was an added advantage as it enabled open communication for the communities. As Phiwe said:

> *"I think it helps*
> *to have someone based in the catchment,*

who speaks the local language.

[2] People are able to share,
can comfortably share anything,
they are comfortable to speak
because they speaking in a language
which they are comfortable with."
… .
The regular interaction has led to learning
about the interests of the communities."

Similar interests fostered human connection in that people with similar interests may end up networking beyond the participatory space, whether forming personal or professional friendships. As Jack remarked:

"[3]I met some cool people,
created networks
that might not have been possible
without those opportunities.
I have a very unlikely best friend,
quite different from me in style,
but we connected
through one of the university activities."

Earlier experiences like the one above where the participant recalls his university days are important for spaces such as the TP since they show that the participant had seen the benefits of being open to diversity, people who are different as the friend whom he calls "*an unlikely best friend*".

In addition to the personal and professional networks that may be developed out of connection with others within a participatory space, the implementing agents also mentioned feeling safe from judgement within the participatory space. Phiwe spoke about a childhood experience of playing soccer, and how not being judged by others allowed him to play soccer even though he was not good at it. The assumption that could be made from Phiwe's statement of not feeling judged is that he felt supported, which is another prominent way in which the participants in this study generally spoke about human connection. Having learned from his previous experience that being supported improved his participation experience probably encouraged him to seek his colleagues' support in the TP, as he later speaks about relating better with the Tsitsa River Catchment community, due to a common language, which

made the residents feel more at ease because they did not have to worry about being judged if they made grammatical errors while communicating in English.

Human connection was also spoken about in relation to the idea of finding one's place within the participatory space in that, for people to trust a person in their role, they needed to connect with the person at some level. Finding a place within a team working towards a common goal was deemed important for ease of communication since the implementing agents believed that communication should be an effort from all those involved, not only those who initiated the interaction. Finding one's place was also mentioned as a prerequisite for being recognised.

2. Recognition

Implementing agents brought up recognition as another important factor for the participatory space. Recognition came up in relation to the need for participation to be inclusive of all relevant and affected stakeholders. 'Inclusive' meaning that the relevant stakeholders need to be recognised for their role within the participatory space, and be given a fair chance to speak. Further, those who are invited should be heard and understood when they speak. The implementing agents specifically highlighted the need to be cognisant of those who are usually marginalised within society, and ensure that their views and beliefs are recognised and incorporated into the decisions made. They further suggested that effort needed to be made to understand why some inputs may not have made it into the final outputs of a process so that participants did not feel like they were either ignored or tokenised. In Jack's words:

> *"One of the biggest challenges in participation*
> *is making sure everyone is participating,*
> *everyone understands,*
> *everyone is heard.*
>
> *[3] But everyone's views are important.*
> *If a decision has to be made,*
> *explain why this decision*
> *was better than the other one."*

Recognition also came up in relation to finding a place – in that having a recognised role or position within a participatory space implies that one's voice is recognised. The implementing agents made an example of their ideas being shut down (not recognised) when they first

entered the TP because they had not found their place yet. They mentioned how Covid-19 brought a positive change for them in that they finally found their role of being on the ground when researchers could not make those trips to the study area due to restrictions of movement; they finally landed. As Jack said:

> *"Some suggestions from the new guys*
> *get shut down*
> *because what do they know?*
> *The other team was there longer,"*

The implementing agents went on to mention the impact of the time of entry into the participatory space. They speak about how difficult it was to be recognised when first entering an ongoing participatory space as newcomers, a space that was already occupied by those who came first, and who had already conceptualised the goals and objectives of the space. The implementers felt that those who came first tended to be closed to the usually different suggestions made by the newcomers. As Jack remarked:

> *"It is hard to enter an already occupied space.*
> *Finding a place in an occupied space…*
> *you come in with certain expectations,*
> *but the other team does not give you the opportunity.*
> *It creates some tension.*
> *They expect you to follow their lead,*
> *which is unfair."*

According to the above extract, part of the reason for the lack of recognition is the power struggle between those who entered the space early, and those who came in at later stages. This lack of recognition of others when they first enter a participatory space was perceived to sometimes cause tension within the participatory space for the newcomers.

Apart from being dismissed as a newcomer, the implementing agents spoke about other people being ignored or overlooked solely based on their belonging to a marginalised social group (e.g., Jack came into the TP space with the experience of being "*nerds at school, which led to not considered for leadership positions*"). They suggest that constantly being overlooked may sometimes lead people who belong to such groups feeling discouraged about taking part in similar activities. The implementing agents also mentioned the lack of recognition of others due to homogenisation of people belonging to similar groups. Homogenisation here refers to

the generalisation of people belonging to a similar group and assuming that they have similar belief systems, for instance, Jack stated:

> *[2] An important feature,*
> *in a participatory system:*
> *even if they belong to a similar group,*
> *their perspectives*
> *about their environment*
> *are not homogenous.*

In this way, recognition has a direct link to epistemic (in)justice since recognition of one's ideas promotes epistemic justice whereas non/misrecognition could lead to epistemic injustice. Feeling discouraged due to constant shutdown is what is referred to as testimonial quieting, which defeats the purpose of inviting others to participate in the first place if their ideas are not going to be considered anyway.

Recognition of context also occurred in the implementing agents' narratives. Like the researcher participants, the implementer participants suggested that recognition of local dynamics was vital to effective engagement with local communities; for instance, identifying what the symbols of power are that may guide an outsider in terms of who to encourage to speak more and who to regulate. The implementing agents suggested that the powerful often get their interests taken forward over the marginalised, and placed the responsibility to balance the voices on the facilitator, who is often an outsider. Having an outsider facilitate such a balance is an advantage for the process because they are neither influenced nor intimidated by the social dynamics that usually deny those with the least resources (the less powerful) to contribute to the discussion. Recognition of the local dynamics also guides the outsiders in facilitating a participatory programme on the modes of engagement that can be used to encourage and capture the attention of the local people. For instance, the implementing agents referred to the TP's use of maps to capture the attention of participants as a sign that the TP understood their context. As Phiwe said,

> *"What works in the Tsitsa project*
> *is things like maps*
> *that help capture*
> *attention."*

The implementing agents described the idea of recognising one's context as similar to knowing one's people, the people that one works with. To know the people and the context

of participation was a requirement. The implementing agents further mentioned that recognition was important as a counter-measure against tokenistic behaviour, where little or no effort is made to encourage a diversity of voices in the participatory space. The implementing agents gave an example of a case where an announcement for a meeting was posted in an unpopular newspaper that was not read by many people, which resulted in low attendance by the local people, limiting their ability to give input. In such cases, the decision-making lies with a few people, and risks becoming instrumental.

In contrast to researcher participants who primarily spoke about recognition in terms of being heard and having a voice, and resident participants who spoke about being seen, implementing participants spoke primarily about enabling others to express themselves and be heard. In this regard, they emphasised being able to read one's context and identify those voices that would most likely be overlooked and those that might be favoured, based on community standards of ranking or social status, and then striving to encourage those usually silenced voices to contribute. However, implementing agents were acutely aware of how social dynamics of power could impact on how much all voices could be highlighted in different spaces, as well as who the point of contact would be, depending on the purpose of engaging others. For example, deciding who to speak to between a chief and a councillor may sometimes mean knowing who is more likely to influence the community or who is more favoured by the community. This awareness was keenly important to their role as facilitators of the research/community interface, as it enabled relationships of trust to be built with both communities and traditional leadership, which was necessary for effective engagement of the communities of interest. In Jack's words:

> *"Context plays a huge part*
> *in the effectiveness of participation.*
>
> *Some people refuse,*
> *or are uncomfortable,*
> *working with traditional leadership;*
> *they prefer political leadership.*
>
> *There may be places*
> *where that political system works.*
> *It might not work*
> *in the rural contexts*

that we work in."

In all, recognition plays a vital role in making members of a participatory space feel comfortable about making their input, which serves the purpose of inviting different people to engage in a participatory process.

3. Learning and adapting

In their description of participation, the implementers described participation as being about the involvement of different stakeholders, whose different skills and expertise fostered learning. The implementers also spoke about the influence of previous experience in enabling them to be open to learning and adapting to new participatory spaces. They mentioned that when they had experienced tension at the beginning of their engagement within the TP, it was not surprising for them since they had learned from previous experience. For example, Phiwe said:

"When we first entered the Tsitsa space,
there were miscommunications.
That didn't bother me much
because I've been working in different big projects;
when they start,
there are always those misunderstandings."

Learning for the implementing agents, like the resident participants and researcher participants, also came out of starting from a place of ignorance, then being open to gaining enough information about the space to be able to adapt their initial goals. As Phiwe remarked:

"The Tsitsa project is getting more interesting.
I can see the goal and the mission
of the project;
it aims to leave the land in good health.
….
"When they said, 'working on dongas',
my expectation was that I was going to see bulldozers.
I did not realise that, no,
the bulldozer would only fix for the now;
what is going to happen tomorrow?
I saw value in the research that was done."

Not surprisingly, the expectation of actual gully-filling was also brought up by resident participants and researcher participants, who all eventually adapted their expectations after

learning and gaining better understanding of the TP. The actual gully-filling expectation was not surprising because that is the idea with which the project started, with the whole budget skewed to fill old dongas, while the TP 'way' that was made of mainly research became communicated over time to government and implementers.

For the implementing agents, having sufficient and clear information enabled them to proceed in a participatory manner. The information needed to be provided by those who initiated to bring everyone along with them so that people were not confused about what was required of them. Again, as Phiwe said:

> *"Without clear information,*
> *people will not participate.*
> *When they do not understand the aim of their participation,*
> *the process is labelled as belonging to someone else,*
> *as people won't feel like they own the space."*

As evident in the above example, the implementing agents further suggest that being clearly and properly informed also invokes a sense of ownership for those taking part. They also mentioned the establishment of livestock associations as an outcome of having recognised that it was important within the Tsitsa catchment context.

The implementer participants also spoke about self-awareness as enabling for participation. They suggested that realising certain attributes about themselves allowed them to be more open to change and enabled them to adapt where necessary. For instance, Phiwe said:

> *"There is a certain level*
> *when you realise that*
> *no,*
> *I'm not a player;*
> *I was not that good at playing.*
>
> *[2] …*
> *I'm good at coaching."*

This all shows the role played by learning and adapting within a participatory space, and how productive the space becomes when everyone is informed and is, in turn, able to share and gain new knowledge. The idea of exercising more agency with more information shows how learning could promote epistemic justice in some instances by levelling the conversation playing field.

3. Hope and Frustration

Though not mentioned as frequently as frustration, the implementer participants mentioned hope as one of the motivating factors for taking part in some activities. Hope for a positive change, and hope for things to improve so that future generations do not experience similar disadvantages as older generations. For instance, Phiwe said,

> *"When we had those trials*
> *we would compete against people*
> *with experience.*
> *I'm trying to change that,*
> *coaching from an early age."*

The example above shows how coaching young people can bring hope for them to compete at a fair advantage with those from experienced backgrounds. His sport experience brings the idea of hope into the TP space, hope for what could be achieved.

Like the other categories of participants, implementers also experienced frustrations when things did not go as planned. For instance, entering the TP space and having their ideas shut down ultimately prevented them from achieving their obligatory goals in the project. Another frustration, which stemmed from an experience prior to the TP, was that of fighting coaches and ill-equipped referees for Phiwe who, according to him, derailed him from his primary purpose of motivating and encouraging young talent. In his words:

> *"One thing I hate in sports*
> *is fighting;*
> *we need to set a good example*
> *for the young people that we deal with.*
>
> *[5] It gets frustrating*
> *for the young players*
> *who train hard*
> *only to be let down by an individual."*

In a transdisciplinary space such as the TP, there is an increased chance of conflict due to differing interests, and so prior experiences like the one above could be helpful in avoiding conflict that could discourage some people from participating further.

4. Other enabling and/or inhibiting factors: self-awareness and language

Self-awareness

In his life experience of participation, one of the participants mentioned that becoming aware of his capabilities allowed him to find his passion in sports and stick to it. As Phiwe commented:

> *"There is a certain level*
> *when you realise that*
> *no,*
> *I'm not a player;*
> *I was not that good at playing.*
> *….*
> *I'm good at coaching.*
>
> *[3] As we speak,*
> *I run a soccer team.*
> *I also assist a ladies netball team,*
> *though I'm not hands-on;*
> *I sponsor them out of love."*

Having the awareness of what he was and/or was not good at enabled him to choose to take part in things that he was good at and most comfortable with.

Language

Though not prominent in this stakeholder category, language was mentioned as an enabling factor for participation in the TP; that is, that speaking a similar language made communication much better.

> *"I think it helps*
> *to have someone based in the catchment,*
> *who speaks the local language.*
>
> *People are able to share,*
> *can comfortably share anything,*
> *they are comfortable to speak*
> *because they speaking in a language*
> *which they are comfortable with."*

Therefore, language was considered crucial, enabling easy communication that provided comfort for participants.

4.5. Government participants

4.5.1 Government participants' poems

Participant 16: Mandla (3 poems)

Mandla is a government worker in the natural resources management division. His first encounter with the Tsitsa Project was when he was invited to its launch. He was brought in as someone who knew the area because he had worked on other projects in the area. He also influenced the decision to get researchers involved in the Tsitsa Project, and has worked closely with them by being involved in meetings, workshops and even conferences.

Poem 1 **It's to make the load easy**

[1] For participation to take place
there needs to be other people
involved.

[2] Unlike a car garage,
which is safe by just locking the doors,
a plantation requires the involvement
of other parties.
one can't do it alone.

[3] On a rugby field,
you can't score alone;
the enabler is team effort,
and the participation of others.

[4] There would be a time where you disappear.
Be proactive.
It's like a relay,
when I run on my hundred meters,

[5] I need to give you this baton in a proper way
so you can run your mile.
We know our goal,
it's a team effort.

[6] On a rugby field or cricket field
we're also participating,
as spectators sharing views,
"*no, he's supposed to be doing it that way.*"

[7] I do not know these people,
but at the end of the day
we want something in common.

[8] I look at years back
when Rhodes came in,
how suddenly things changed;
not changing to the bad,
changing for the better.

It was hard in the initial stages.
Change is not easy,
but accepting it,
and going with it,
that is how participation is;
it's to make the load easy.

For Mandla in this poem, the essence of participation is to build towards a similar goal, which requires a team of members each playing a role. Being cognisant of the diverse roles makes the load easier. He reiterates this by making an example of how the TP became better when Rhodes University joined the team, and mentions that teamwork comes with challenges, but respecting the process allows for the challenges to be overcome.

In stanza 1, participation is about collaboration between many people, then in stanza 2, he uses a metaphor to explain the need for collaboration, by comparing participation to a plantation where the work of protecting it cannot be done by one person, unlike a car garage. Another metaphor in stanza 3 compares participation to a rugby field, where a goal comes from team effort, even though one person may deliver it and get the credit.

He refers to participation as a relay in stanza 4, where what may be started by someone else may need to be continued and completed by other people, and so it is important to empower those who are meant to take over the duty (baton) in time to ensure a smooth transition and transfer of power (aiming, then, for more emancipatory approaches than instrumental

approaches if the goal is to relinquish power to other people in order for them to sustain the efforts of an initiative). In stanzas 5 and 6, he uses another sports metaphor, where he views spectators as participants with a common interest, sharing views on how to get to the common goal of winning the game even though they may be strangers. He continues with an example of how collaboration between their institution (government) and Rhodes University changed the project for the better (stanza 7). He warns that such change is not always easy at first, but it gets better with time when everyone realises their roles and begin to share the workload (stanza 8).

Poem 2 **I had a contribution**

[1] Where one lays their views
and they are listened to,
one needs to be able to say:
I have a contribution in that thing.

[2] I want my name
to be remembered positively
not negatively.

[3] In my workplace,
participation is based
on the values of *Batho-Pele*:
people first,

[4] people-centric,
viewing a person as a person,
listening to that person.

[5] For the research aspect,
decisions could not be taken
from just looking.

[6] Making local people the critical aspect
and the name change[10]

[10]The Tsitsa Project was formerly known as the Ntabelanga-Laleni Ecological and Infrastructural Project (NLEIP), but after feedback from residents, consensus was reached mid-way through the project to change the name to the shorter and more relatable Tsitsa Project (TP).

I had a contribution.

In this poem, Mandla speaks about recognition for one's efforts becoming a motivation for taking part in certain activities (stanza 1). In stanza 2, he states that he wants to be remembered positively, which is still recognition. He refers to the principles that guide participation at his work, which are focused on recognising the people involved, and listening to them (stanzas 3 and 4). In stanza 5, he is proud to have been part of the decision to make local people a critical aspect of the project, and the name change from the technical Ntabelanga-Laleni Ecological and Infrastructural Project (NLEIP) to Tsitsa Project (TP). The poem suggests that recognition plays a crucial role in the participatory space for some people.

Poem 3 You create some space

[1] The red flags for me:
a rigid facilitator,
one who is not open to different views:
it is either this way
or the highway;

[2] time being wasted,
losing focus of the topic at hand,
derailing to other casual ones
that are totally unrelated to the purpose.

[3] You are looking for information
you don't currently have,
so you create some space,
an environment conducive
for you to get what you want.

In this poem, Mandla discusses the need to create a conducive space to achieve the purpose of participation in stanza 3. He gives examples of what makes a non-conducive environment for him, including lack of flexibility by the facilitator (stanza 1), and derailing from the primary topic (stanza 2).

In all, Mandla's view of participation is that it must be collaborative, inclusive of different voices, and yet recognise each person's input as valuable and special to the process. He concludes by voicing factors that create a less conducive environment for participation.

Participant 17: Jemma (9 poems)

Jemma was involved with the TP from shortly after its inception. Her former role was supporting the NRM Chief Director in conceptualising the project within the DFFE and representing the Chief Director in various forums, platforms and meetings. More recently (the past three years) her role has been the DFFE contract manager for the project.

Poem 1 There's something for me about participation

[1] There's something for me
about participation
that speaks to respect,
that speaks to equality
of opportunity,
for voices to be heard;
inclusion rather than exclusion.

[2] Where more voices are heard,
your result is hopefully better.
It elevates the individuals,
it elevates the whole,
it elevates the activity that you're working on,
- real engaged participation and collaboration.

[3] A strong sense of team,
all of us from different
contexts, backgrounds, experience
participating in a team
supporting each other.
We held each other
and worked together.
We overcame misunderstandings
and cultural barriers.

[4] The feeling of being part of something,
being included;
everyone's perspective valued.
It was really inviting and dynamic.

[5] I could see something different
was happening there,
more difference in the room,
and more different representation
of different fields and beings.

[6] Underpinning my idea of participation
is a sense of equality,
equality of access:
even if people have equal opportunity
the opportunity is not necessarily equal
because of status,
and power,
and influence,
and personal politics,
and all the other dynamics.

[7] I think it's harder
to hold a participatory process
that is more than just lip service,
or rubber stamping,
or box ticking;
when people are excluded,
when I've been excluded,
it's like this whole voice isn't present,
the incredible power of team through participation,
build it together.

[8] There's a kind of shared purpose
and shared intention
that's an important ingredient of participation.
It doesn't have to be the same,
but some kind of shared purpose
together.

[9] You're contributing to something,
building an understanding that is shared.

[10] There has to be a framing.

If people don't have a shared understanding of that framing,
it can go wrong
or you won't get as far as you might have got…

[11] transparency and openness
we all have different understandings
of what that actually means.

the incredible power of team through participation.

In this poem, Jemma discusses the different aspects that are essential in making the participatory space work. Like Mandla, Jemma speaks about the importance of building a team, having a shared goal and intention and being inclusive of the different voices that are represented. She also speaks about recognising diversity within a team, and how team building is also about moving past cultural barriers and connecting with one another. She makes an example of how she has observed some of these dynamics working well in the TP, which she describes as ensuring that all voices are valuable, which has, in turn, built a strong sense of team. She raises our awareness of the power dynamics that may prevent the proper inclusion of all voices, giving rise to tokenistic behaviour.

Stanza 1 describes what participation means for her: respectful inclusion of all voices, and equal opportunities to speak. In stanza 2, explains that more voices are needed to improve the outcome of the space and the people involved. She refers to her experience of the TP (stanzas 3 and 4), where she observed a strong team made up by the diversity of the people involved supporting each other to overcome the cultural barriers and personal misunderstandings. She experienced the feeling of being part of something, being included and experiencing everyone's perspective as considered valuable in stanza 5. In stanza 6, she re-iterates what she already stated in stanza 1, but goes on to explain what equality of opportunity means, and that this kind of equality is influenced by a number of factors, including power, influence and politics. Stanza 7 focuses on tokenism as a result of excluding other voices, and the difficulty of avoiding it. Participation for her is also about a shared purpose and intention that needs to be worked on together by those involved to build a shared understanding (stanza 8). She discusses a shared framing that must be understood to prevent things from going wrong (stanza 9), and concludes by mentioning transparency and openness as a way to nurture shared understanding and encourage inclusion.

Poem 2 **It's about striving for equal participation**

[1] There's something about people feeling comfortable.
A capacity thing,
A confidence thing.
I just remember
summoning up my courage,
and being ridiculed for the idea I'd come up with.
I can still remember the feeling now:
I'm just going to be quiet,
that was really uncomfortable
so that helped keep me quiet.

[2] Invitation:
to be invited into,
or space be made for you;
sometimes you have to force
or push for space.
My boss made space for me,
he wanted me to participate.
I always felt welcomed,
and I was able to witness participation unfold.

[3] There was an intention
of creating participatory processes,
trying to break down the silos
between the different approaches
and the academic disciplines.
Those spaces were intentionally created,
but watching from the outside,
there was still a slightly siloed approach,
quite defined by boundaries.

[4] There was an effort to move through that,
to be more inclusive and participatory
across the communities of practice.
I don't think it happens naturally
or easily.
It's almost like,

as human beings,
we need to create these boundaries.

[5] To have seen the depth of collaboration,
the depth of partnership,
the depth of team that was built;
deep participation within the project team:
It was really tangible.

[6] Participation means different things
to different people.
People's abilities and capabilities are different
in different contexts.
There's a bit of a vulnerability in it -
you have to be comfortable expressing yourself.
Those thresholds differ,
for different people.
Cultivate that
in different ways.

[7] Even intention isn't enough
you can't be right for everyone.
That intention does matter,
but it's about striving
for as equal participation
as possible.

[8] There's got to be intention,
and thought
and space
and curation,
for participation.

In this poem, Jemma, like Mandla, speaks about creating a conducive space for the audience and cultivating their different capabilities and thresholds. Jemma describes a conducive space as one that strives to include all the voices, unlike her experience of a facilitator who dismissed her once by ridiculing her contribution.

In addition to inclusion that was the theme in the preceding poem, she speaks about comfort, capacity and confidence as further ingredients that enable participation (stanza 1). In the same stanza describes a previous experience where she had been ridiculed for an idea that she had come up with, and how it made her feel so uncomfortable that she did not speak again. The decision to keep quiet could be what is called testimonial smothering, where a person does not contribute their idea because they know that it will not be considered anyway. In stanza 2, she talks about how space can be made for others to participate, including through invitation or forcing for space. She refers back to the TP in stanzas 3 and 4, where her observation was that the intention to collaborate was evident, but the disciplinary boundaries were still quite defined. She noticed the efforts that were taken to be less siloed, yet it was still hard to break the boundaries, making her conclude that maybe creating boundaries comes more naturally in humans as a protective measure.

She recognises depth in the TP, depth of collaboration, partnership, team, and participation (stanza 5), so, through her experience of the TP, she realised that having just an intention to work collaboratively and inclusively is not enough; it requires the amount of effort placed into making equal participation a reality. She ends the poem by re-stating some of the ingredients to turn intention into a reality: thought, space, and curation. Thought here means paying attention and thinking through each step; space means creating a conducive space to enable all to feel comfortable contributing; and curation means taking time selecting and organising pieces until it all comes together.

Poem 3 **You have to take much longer**

[1] It's not a rubber stamping or rushed process.
If you really want people
to truly participate,
allow that process the time that it takes.

[2] It's not a foregone conclusion:
there's something dynamic in that play,
that it's not fixed.
You have to take much longer,
give more time and resources;
it needs to be held.

In this poem, Jemma comments on having the patience to watch the process unfold, to allow one the chance to learn how to better include all voices. In this way, taking the time to learn the dynamics of the space can help to prevent tokenistic behaviour. She also places emphasis on time and other resources that are needed to do it well.

Poem 4 **Hoping that something potentially could change**

[1] Hoping that something,
potentially,
could change
because of your participation;
a feeling of possibility and hope,
working alongside people
and building something.

[2] A special feeling:
I feel it in the heart,
that feeling of being
part of something,
making a contribution
to something bigger than myself
contributing to a beneficial impact.

[3] The Tsitsa Project had a different approach.
It was much more integrated;
that has had a softer spot in my heart.
It's exciting and dynamic
trying to do something differently,
recognising
that the way we've been working,
isn't working.

[4] I'm motivated by making a difference,
feeling that it matters.
It matters to me
that I make someone else's workflow
better,
not so much being part of something bigger,
but making a contribution.

[5] Imagine
if there was a slightly different,
more relational approach taken
in the different pockets of work that we do…
We could make a huge difference.

[6] Practitioners combined with researchers,
that was exciting!
A whole mixture,
and people saying:
we've got to look at the drivers
and we've got to look at *these*…
There were about 15 different conversations
going on at once:
it was like chaos
but so much energy!

[7] The facilitator was holding this space,
but there was this moment,
of absolute energy and excitement:
he wanted to hold that space,
not bring it to order,
not contain it.

[8] That was a key moment in my life.
That was like
oh my god what is going on?
it was just exciting
to see that level of energy be held,
and then people settled back
into their streams of thought.

[9] It was participatory,
engaging lots of people,
enthusiasm
and dynamism
and excitement
around what it could be.

In the 1st and 2nd stanzas, Jemma speaks about hope as her motivation, hope to make an impact through her participation and the satisfaction that would come with making such a contribution. Jemma explains why the TP was special for her, especially from a government perspective (stanza 3). The main thing in stanza 3 was the integration, in different and dynamic ways that recognised that what used to work before no longer did. She was further excited by the endless possibilities that could come out of the TP approach (stanza 4). The TP gave her hope that she could be part of something special, something that could lead to real impact based on the different backgrounds of the people in the space, all using different angles to tackle the subject matter of the TP (stanza 5). She speaks about experiencing a facilitator who let go of control, and how she felt that allowed for participants to get more out of that particular process. Yes, it might have looked like chaos at first, but it was meant to be (stanzas 6 and 7). She describes the moment in stanzas 6 and 7 as key in her life (stanza 8). In stanza 9, she concludes by explaining why the moment was key for her; that is, it was participatory, engaging many people, enthusiastic, dynamic, and exciting.

Poem 5 **A really important lesson**

[1] It was an incredibly painful learning process
but a really important lesson for me;

[2] not making assumptions
around the need for transparency,
and not doing things
for people
but *with people.*

[3] Things don't always go the way you expect;
recognizing that you may fall short,
and learning from that,

[4] there was still learning in it.
I was able to reflect
at various points
and extract learning
for myself

[5] it unlocked people's understanding
and expanded what their role can be.

That has built new capabilities,
working in different ways.
It was a space that helped to grow
a sustainability of practice,
a practice of collaboration,
and of participation.

[6] People are talking
about the things they've gone on to do,
that are different
from what they were doing before:

[7] sustainability and behaviour change,
taking an approach to other project spaces,
carried from the Tsitsa project.

[8] Who I am,
what interests or excites me,
my experiences;
what I have seen,
what I have witnessed
working and not working,
the places I have made mistakes,
the places I have done well.

[9] A deep recognition:
we cannot
we cannot
carry on as we are,

[10] we can't
we really can't.
It's broken.
It's not working.

In this poem, Jemma discusses the idea of learning and adapting based on the lessons learned from the spaces that one participates in. In stanza 1, she refers to not making assumptions about the needs of others, which implies deciding together instead of for others. In stanza 2, she speaks about staying open to the possibility of participation's emergent outcomes, that may be far from what was initially expected. She highlights the need to reflect on what has happened, and no matter how unexpected it may be, extract lessons from it (stanza 3). In stanzas 4 to 6, she refers to how the TP has built new capabilities among those who were involved so that out of their experiences of the project, they went on to try and incorporate the TP's way of working in their new spaces. For her, this change in practice for the TP participant-stakeholders has unlocked and expanded their roles, and shows sustainability and behaviour change. Her perspective here relates to that of Anna, who also found the accumulation of the lessons from different spaces helpful in getting a better understanding of participatory processes. Stanza 7 notes the factors that have motivated and enabled her to participate, which are mainly lessons from previous experiences. She places more emphasis on the need for change in how participation is undertaken since the current way is no longer working (stanzas 8 and 9).

Poem 6 **I had not understood**

[1] There are rules of the game;
those rules change and differ
from context to context.

[2] I was trying to participate
and broke the flow;
I interrupted the flow
of the process,
not understanding,
not knowing,
not being wise enough
to listen and understand.

[3] Because I didn't understand,
and wasn't aware
of the rules that framed that situation,
I got it wrong.

I possibly insulted people,
not intentional,
but disrespectful.
I didn't allow the process to unfold as it needed to.

[4] In my ignorance
I had not understood
the dynamics around money.
Being a young, white, English-speaking woman
meant colonial overtones of controlling resources.
I hadn't included;
I hadn't allowed people
to participate fully
in owning the whole process.

Again, like Anna, Jemma learned the hard way to recognise her context and the rules that guide effective, transformative participation, in terms of what works for the local people. In stanza 1, she acknowledges that every context has rules that guide participation, and that those rules differ from context to context. Stanza 2 notes her regret in failing to be wise enough to listen, and ended up breaking the flow of the process owing to her ignorance of the context. The idea of being ignorant and making assumptions about the context left her feeling that she had insulted people since she had not taken the time to understand as she has described in her earlier poem '*you need to take time'*. In her reflection (stanza 4) on the experience, she related her behaviour to her race, perpetuating the stereotype that placed her in control of resources and excluding the local people, leaving them feeling disrespected and insulted by her behaviour.

Poem 7 **My job is to make a contribution**

[1] My job is to make a contribution
to society,
to South Africa,
and that motivates me
as a human being.

[2] It's not about me
it's bigger than me.

It feels more right
to be part of something;
they're not always…
participation processes can unravel.

[3] My bosses recognise my interest
in social learning,
partnership building,
work that is more collaborative in nature.
I am interested in it,
but partly it's that my 'male' colleagues
are actively disinterested.

[4] I avoid giving presentations.
It makes me deeply uncomfortable.
If you're clear about where those boundaries are,
that allows for a different way of being

[5] You can be collegial
and team building
and collaborative,
but there's certain non-negotiables,
and if everyone knows that up front,
that's bound to help.

In this poem, Jemma speaks about her motivation for taking part in activities, and further discusses some factors that have encouraged her to participate in other activities. In the 1st stanza she refers to her job as a motivation for her to make a contribution (stanza 1) and moves on in stanza 2, to her bosses recognition of her interest and making a space for her, and her colleague's disinterest leaving the space for her to take the role, which she finds motivating. She also mentions being clear about the boundaries, and their ability to enable participation within the bounds in stanzas 3 and 4, which relates to Kathy's idea about rules and allowing freedom within their bounds. In stanza 5, Jemma explains that, even though in previous poems she referred to wanting to be a part of something bigger than herself, a positive change, she acknowledges that despite believing in participation, it is fragile and can unravel.

Poem 8 **I think we've probably deeply disappointed**

[1] The Tsitsa space was
a space
to try something different.

[2] Even in that
we failed.
We still failed.
We failed the project,
we failed the residents.

[3] We could have made a difference,
but just at a point
where they developed
these integrated nodal plans,
we stopped funding the project.

[4] That is heart-breaking.
It's a lost opportunity,
such a lost opportunity
to demonstrate that,
okay,
it takes longer,
but look at what is possible
if you do it this way.

[5] It's just this piece,
left hanging,
and I think we've
probably
deeply
disappointed.

In this poem, Jemma expresses her frustration with government stopping funding the TP early, without seeing all that it could have achieved. She also speaks about a lost opportunity for the institution, which in turn, resulted in failing many people.

In stanza 1 she refers to the TP space as something different from anything she had ever experienced before, but as evident in stanza 2, they (the government) failed at it, and in the process failed everyone who was involved. For her, the TP could have been government's way to make a real impact (stanza 3), but they stopped funding the project before other phases of the project could be completed. Failure to see the TP through to completion was a crucial lost opportunity for the government to demonstrate the patience required to implement a successful transdisciplinary project such as the TP. Stanza 4 completes the poem by pointing out how disappointing it must have been for everyone to be forced to leave things hanging.

Poem 9 **It was an opportunistic process**

[1] We convened a workshop,
a big learning platform,
the death-by-PowerPoint-approach[11].

[2] We put together
a very full program,
a horribly full program.

[3] It wasn't successful.
It was just too much,
it was overwhelming,

[4] trying to be inclusive,
but not very effective
as a result.

[5] A kind of rubber-stamping exercise
interrupted; that whole process was interrupted,
by what wasn't connected
to what we had convened around.
It was an opportunistic process.

[6] We sat and listened to somebody
take us through a few steps,

[11]Death by PowerPoint describes a presentation that is tedious and makes you want to sleep and is caused by improper PowerPoint usage.

no time to reflect on what was being presented.

[7] There weren't many opportunities to question,
but they managed to tick their box -
that's absolutely not participation.

[8] I have a problem
With how the department,
and how government,
approaches participation:

[9] it's not participation;
it's just a rubber stamp.
It's insulting and patronizing,

[10] a behaviour,
and an attitude to participation
that's not participatory
still sits at the core

[11] of government's idea of participation:
we've communicated,
you've participated,
let's move on.

[12] Like those public consultation processes…
is that really participation?
Or are you just giving people
a teeny little window
to say things
that you're going to ignore
anyway?

[13] We don't have the skills;
well, maybe some of us do,
but there's no space.

[14] We need to be trying
to learn a new way of working,

but the systems…
that's the bigger issue.

[15] People have been trained in particular ways,
they've been quite rigid.
Social process isn't valued,
especially with the hard sciences,
but it's also that our systems
don't allow for risk-taking,
experimentation,
collaboration,

[16] and working across
in partnership,
the change in language.

[17] What was sitting underneath
Was they're not really interested
in relationship
or partnership
or learning

[18] but in service delivery,
in a series of measurable outcomes,
in tick boxes.

[19] Maybe it makes sense
when you're dealing with that kind of scale.
Maybe that's why I'm so excited
by just seeing something happening.

[20] I don't think government has it right.
There are interesting models;
people have tried to do things,
and huge changes come out of that thinking

[21] but often,
because it takes more time and resources,
we take the easy route.

[22] When municipal people in the room
want to talk about safeguarding the river,
there are other urgent things
that people want to engage on,

[23] because there are no spaces
to have those conversations and
to hold people accountable.

In this poem Jemma expresses her frustration over the tokenistic manner of involving the public, which still sits at the core of most of government's models of participation. In stanza 1 she reflects on a workshop where a death-by-PowerPoint-approach was used, which is an improper use of PowerPoint that ends up boring the audience. In stanza 2 she explains that what made the situation worse was the horribly full programme, which was not successful as it became overwhelming for those involved (stanza 3). Stanza 4 alerts us to the fact that there is an ineffective way of being inclusive, when trying to do too much at once and ending up introducing opportunistic topics that are completely unrelated to the task of the day, and which in turn ends up being tokenistic when no one in the audience manages to even make an input (stanzas 5 and 6). In stanza 7 she describes the act of not giving enough opportunities for input as a tick-box exercise for the facilitating agency (government in this case) not participation.

In stanza 8, expresses her disapproval of the way government and her department handle participation, and refers to it not as participation, but as a rubber stamp, insulting and patronising (stanza 9). In stanza 10, she says that this instrumental participation still sits at the core of government's approach to participation, which, as expressed in stanza 11, is about ticking certain boxes for reporting purposes, not focusing on making a real impact on the ground. She makes an example of public consultation processes, where, in her experience, people have been invited under the pretence that their input would influence the final outcome, yet there is limited opportunity to speak, and the little that is said hardly ever changes anything since all input is ignored (stanza 12).

Stanzas 13 and 14 voice her belief that in addition to a lack of skills to facilitate participatory processes among government officials, the biggest limiting factor is the government system,

which does not necessarily permit space for experimentation and collaboration (stanza 15). Also in stanza 15 is the idea that departments like hers are made up of natural scientists, who are not trained in a manner that values social processes. In stanza 16, she adds that the system does not explicitly support working in partnerships, as is evident in the language used. By 'language' she refers to the emphasis placed on service delivery and measurable outcomes, which implicitly show their disinterest in relationship, partnership, or learning, but are rather tick-box exercises, as evident in stanzas 17 and 18. She empathises with those for whom the reports are meant at a higher scale, to say that it might make sense for them, but still questions whether or not it works on the ground (stanza 19).

In stanza 20 she mentions the existence of good models that exist on paper, but are not being translated into practice by government officials, which might include impressive principles such as those that Mandla spoke about (although he did not clearly say they were translated into practice). She observes (stanza 21) is that people end up cutting corners because of how much time and other resources are needed to collaborate and experiment properly, and then concludes by showing the disadvantage of the tokenistic ways in which public consultation processes are conducted, which usually leave people with endless questions that may sometimes be asked in an opportunistic manner that disrupts other processes.

In all, Jemma's narrative was focused mainly on the lessons she learned out of her different experiences of participation, and how they have influenced how she perceives participation. Team, relationships, collaboration, equality of access, equal opportunity, being respectful of rules in context, and the power of letting a participatory process unfold are all important ingredients for a successful participatory event as she understands it.

4.5.2. Government participants' themes

The purpose of this section is to present the framing of participation, based on the experiences of the government officials who took part in the TP. The most prominent themes that came out of their narratives are the following: 1) hope and frustration; 2) human connection; 3) recognition; 4) learning and adapting; and 5) other enablers and/or inhibitors of participation (including time and race).

1. Hope and frustration

As with the researcher participants, the theme of hope, expressed in government participants' desire to contribute positively to something bigger, emerged as a key theme. Further to their duty as government employees, charged with the responsibility to make a difference in the lives of society and South Africa, these participants were also driven by a personal motivation to make a positive impact in the lives of others. As a result, these participants were excited by the potential impact of the TP; they spoke about what the TP might mean for participants, a chance to do things right, through for instance, bringing a collective of academics and practitioners and implementers together to work on the project. In Jemma's words:

> *" [3] The Tsitsa Project had a different approach.*
> *It was much more integrated;*
> *that has had a softer spot in my heart.*
> *It's exciting and dynamic*
> *trying to do something differently,*
> *recognising*
> *that the way we've been working,*
> *isn't working."*
> *…*
>
> *[6] Practitioners combined with researchers,*
> *that was exciting!*
> *A whole mixture,*
> *and people saying:*
> *we've got to look at the drivers*
> *and we've got to look at these…*
> *There were about 15 different conversations*
> *going on at once:*
> *it was like chaos*
> *but so much energy!"*

These participants also expressed excitement about the long-term nature of the TP, which differed from government's usual short-term project cycles. Their excitement in this regard was particularly related to their hope for the potential impact of the project.

In addition to hoping for a positive impact coming about as a result of their participation, government participants spoke about hoping to feel satisfied as a result of their contribution. As Jemma said:

"Hoping that something,
potentially,
could change
because of your participation;
a feeling of possibility and hope,
working alongside people
and building something.

A special feeling:
I feel it in the heart,
that feeling of being
part of something,
making a contribution
to something bigger than myself
contributing to a beneficial impact."

The government participants also noted that they were involved with the hope that the results would be better than they are when fewer people made decisions on behalf of other people.

In contrast, the government participants also expressed their frustration when things did not go as they had hoped. For instance, one of their biggest frustrations was the way government agencies addressed participation, which is still mainly dominated by the instrumental approaches described earlier in the thesis, and tokenisation of the public who are invited for their consultation processes. In Jemma's words:

"I have a problem
With how the department,
and how government,
approaches participation:

[9] it's not participation;
it's just a rubber stamp.
It's insulting and patronizing,
…
[12] Like those public consultation processes…
is that really participation?
Or are you just giving people
a teeny little window
to say things
that you're going to ignore

anyway?"

Another frustration evident in government participants' narratives was that of the TP's funding that was abruptly stopped, leaving many people in despair over what could have been achieved. As Jemma remarked:

"The Tsitsa space was
a space
to try something different.

[2] Even in that
we failed.
We still failed.
We failed the project,]
we failed the residents.

[3] We could have made a difference,
but just at a point
where they developed
these integrated nodal plans,
we stopped funding the project."

The ideas around hope and frustration for the government participants, like other participants in this study, relate to hoping that their involvement leads to a positive change in the lives of those whom they engage with. Frustration results from things not going as they had hoped.

2. Human connection

Like other groups, government participants described participation as a collaborative process among different people, who, again, work together as a team towards a common purpose that connects them. Mandla drew on the metaphor of a crowd of spectators at a game, who instantly connect with one another over their shared desire for a particular team to win the game. As he said:

"On a rugby field or cricket field
we're also participating,
as spectators sharing views,
'no, he's supposed to be doing it that way.'

I do not know these people,

but at the end of the day
we want something in common."

What is also evident in the statement above is how strangers connect over their common goal of wanting their team to win. The government participants go on to emphasise common purpose/intention as an important ingredient in fostering participation. For instance, Jemma claimed that:

"There's a kind of shared purpose
and shared intention
that's an important ingredient of participation.
It doesn't have to be the same,
but some kind of shared purpose
together.

These participants claimed that a team should include or involve people from different walks of life, who would then connect over their similar goals or interests.

The government participants suggested that building relationships of trust helped to foster working together as a team towards a common purpose. Relationships of trust improved the participants' ability to support each other, as was the case with researcher participants and implementing agents. Again, Jemma claimed that:

"A strong sense of team,
all of us from different
contexts, backgrounds, experience
participating in a team
where we supported each other.
We held each other
and worked together.
We overcame misunderstandings
and cultural barriers."

In this way, the consideration of the diversity within the team allowed the participants in Jemma's team to work better together. Working as a team, and recognising the roles played by others makes the load easier to bear because responsibilities are shared to build towards a common purpose and avoid hierarchies. Another way they suggested of sharing the load was through outsiders (including researchers and implementers) empowering members of the community to take over responsibility to sustain the TP's efforts when other participants left the area. As Mandla said:

"There would be a time where you disappear.
Be proactive.
It's like a relay,
when I run on my hundred meters,
I need to give you this baton in a proper way
so you can run your mile.
We know our goal,
it's a team effort."

Government participants spoke about the need to enable equal access to participatory spaces so that communities can acquire certain kinds of information and contribute to decision-making. They noted that in many cases, this entails inviting others who have the required information into a space to share what they know, or creating a platform for those who are interested in discussing an issue to do so.

Government participants referred to comfort in the TP space as an enabler of participation and discomfort as an inhibitor. One participant noted:

"I just remember summoning up my courage
and being ridiculed for the idea that I'd come up with.
That was really uncomfortable.
So that helped keep me quiet."

In this case, the participant was discouraged from further participation due to feeling embarrassed by and so uncomfortable with others in the space. In this vein, participants noted that degrees of comfort can change from context to context.

3. Recognition: participation as inclusive, respectful and people-centric

Recognition was also important for government participants in a participatory space. Recognition of all the people involved in a participatory space, especially making the local people central, is a critical aspect. For the government participants, participation requires that all those who are involved be given equal opportunity and equal voice within the space, and ensuring that all voices are heard and acknowledged. All perspectives should be treated as valuable in a participatory space, even those that contradict the views of the facilitator. Indeed, the most prominent theme emerging out of this stakeholder group in relation to collaboration was the inclusion of different voices and the assurance that those different voices would be heard. In Mandla's words:

"For participation to take place
there need to be other people
involved.

… Where one lays their views
and they are listened to,
one needs to be able to say:
I have a contribution in that thing."

These participants emphasised that including different voices has the potential to lead to better outcomes, and they focused on the role that respect for others plays when it comes to enabling participation. They claimed that accepting and respecting that people are different and have different roles to play, calls for the need to encourage more voices. As Jemma suggested:

"There's something for me
about participation
that speaks to respect,
that speaks to equality
of opportunity,
for voices to be heard;
inclusion rather than exclusion.

Where more voices are heard,
your result is hopefully better."

Given the above, government participants emphasised the importance of listening to each person's contribution, as well as, once again, the need for human connection in working as a team and overcoming barriers based on differences. In other words, recognising and respecting the cultural differences that may exist within a participatory space.

Government participants also spoke about the ability to hold the participatory space, so that even though different voices come through at the same time, someone could keep it all together. Reflecting on her TP experiences, Jemma felt there was a participatory intention from the beginning to break down the disciplinary boundaries and the silos, but her perception was that, naturally, humans cannot help but create such boundaries because watching from the outside, she was able to observe them. However, because the intention was coupled with a commitment to build deep partnerships and collaboration, there seemed to be enough comfort for many people to express their ideas because they were all made to

feel valuable. This again refers back to the previous theme discussed for this stakeholder category – namely, 'participation as collaboration: inclusivity, respect, and human connection.' The ideas expressed in this paragraph speak to mechanisms that foster epistemic justice in terms of viewing each contribution as credible, regardless of the identity of the person making the contribution.

One participant described participation from a government point of view as people-centric, an approach that promotes the recognition of people as individuals, and the importance of listening to their contributions for what they add to the table, instead of generalising. In Mandla's words:

> *"In my workplace,*
> *participation is based*
> *on the values of Batho-Pele:*
> *people first,*
> *people-centric,*
> *viewing a person as a person,*
> *listening to that person."*

Relatedly, participants also referred to the importance of being familiar with one's context. One participant described their experience of being invited to a new initiative because of their familiarity with the context, and emphasised how useful they were able to be in providing guidance to the new team.

In contrast, another government participant referred to experiences from activities where they were ignorant of the context, which then led to a number of mistakes that she suspected left people feeling disrespected.

Another consideration that emerged relating to awareness of one's context was understanding who the different participants are, especially in terms of what works and what does not work for them. For instance, government participants spoke about recognising diverse values and personality politics that determined what people were interested in. As Jemma noted:

> *"[My approach to participation] is driven by*
> *Who I am,*
> *what interests or excites me,*
> *my experiences;*
> *what I have seen,*

what I have witnessed
working and not working,
the places I have made mistakes,
the places I have done well."

However, it also emerged from their narratives that different dynamics prevent equal access to these spaces, especially in terms of the expression of different voices in these spaces. For instance, government participants described experiences during government activities where the intention was to be participatory but ended up being tokenistic. Jemma's recollected an experience of an activity where she felt that there was too much on the agenda, and the coordinators became opportunistic by using a platform that was meant for a certain purpose for a completely unrelated matter, which ended up being overwhelming and less effective. In her words:

"We put together
a very full program,
a horribly full program.

[3] It wasn't successful.
It was just too much,
it was overwhelming,

[4] trying to be inclusive,
but not very effective
as a result.

[5] A kind of rubber-stamping exercise
interrupted; that whole process was interrupted,
by what wasn't connected
to what we had convened around.
It was an opportunistic process."

On top of that, Jemma spoke about the consultative processes where government usually invites people, gives them information, but gives limited or no time for public questioning and comment. Again, in her words:

"We sat and listened to somebody
take us through a few steps,
no time to reflect on what was being presented.

[7] There weren't many opportunities to question,
but they managed to tick their box -
that's absolutely not participation."

Her concern about government processes is that they are still much more about ticking boxes than partnering and learning with others. Part of the challenge, according to her, is the way in which many of them were trained, especially those in the hard sciences, to not value social processes. Another challenge is the government system, which is not designed to promote collaborations and partnerships, and is mainly driven by defined targets that must be marked off the list as done, so that they can move on to another. Even the language used only promotes service delivery, not long learning processes that require much time and numerous resources. As Jemma claimed:

"We don't have the skills;
well, maybe some of us do,
but there's no space.

We need to be trying
to learn a new way of working,
but the systems…
that's the bigger issue.

People have been trained in particular ways,
they've been quite rigid.
Social process isn't valued,
especially with the hard sciences,
but it's also that our systems
don't allow for risk-taking,
experimentation,
collaboration…"

For these reasons, there is often pushback against investing in genuine collaboration and social learning processes. Given all of the above, government participants emphasised the need for participatory spaces to be carefully curated to ensure that everyone experiences equal access and an opportunity to speak.

4. Learning and adapting

Government participants referred to participation as being a process that needs to unfold, which means that it is not a rigid process but a flexible exercise that should be open to change

based on matters arising. In other words, learning and adapting. They suggested decisions could not be taken by just looking, but required research to learn the context. For instance, Mandla said:

> *"For the research aspect,*
> *decisions could not be taken*
> *from just looking."*

The government participants also claimed that exposure to different contexts had presented them with opportunities to learn different lessons. Participants described becoming involved in different activities, which unlocked their understandings of different dynamics and shaped how they chose to participate. Participants learnt, for instance, what they were and were not comfortable with, based on their experiences of different contexts, and devised coping strategies to overcome or avoid these discomforts in the future. Again, implicit in these statements was the participants' ability to learn about and adapt to different contexts.

On a positive note, many lessons were derived from some regrettable moments, the result of a lack of familiarity with the rules in a given context. For instance, when reflecting on their experiences of the Tsitsa Project, the government participants described it as a good learning experience given the mixture of different people, all learning to work together in different ways. For some government participants, this was hard at first, but became better with time, that is, once everyone had found their place. Government participants also highlighted that knowing the rules in the context within which one is working is an enabler of participation. The idea of rules in context and their ability to provide freedom within their bounds also came up in the researcher participants' narratives.

Furthermore, the participants were impressed by the transformed thinking and acting that they saw in many of the stakeholders, and how some of the lessons were later used in other spaces. According to Jemma,

> *"People are talking*
> *about the things they've gone on to do,*
> *that are different*
> *from what they were doing before:*
>
> *sustainability and behaviour change,*
> *taking an approach to other project spaces,*
> *carried from the Tsitsa project."*

These participants spent time reflecting on both earlier and current practices of coming into other people's area and imposing what is and isn't going to be the case. Just like the researcher participants (especially Kathy), they warned that outsiders have no right telling people what needs to happen in their own back yard; that this was no longer working. In Jemma's words:

> *"the deep recognition that we cannot,*
> *we cannot carry on as we are,*
> *we can't,*
> *we really can't.*
>
> *Its broken, it's not working!"*

This theme essentially shows how participants expressed the ability to adapt, based on what they learnt from the different contexts that they participated in. It also shows that these participants tended to experience a journey of self-discovery in this new setting; they learnt new things about themselves in terms of who they are and what they stand for.

5. Other enablers and/or inhibitors of participation

Government participants spoke about how much time is needed to invest in a participatory process if one hopes to achieve proper collaboration. They described participation as a process that needed to unfold or unravel organically. Put differently, they suggested that time must be taken to allow stakeholders to form solid relationships, by recognising their differences and similarities and harnessing these strategically to form a common purpose. Allowing for the process to unfold organically also implies acquiring an understanding of how different concepts are framed, including participation and transparency, as opposed to a facilitator who is not flexible enough to accept new perspectives on a given matter. In letting the participatory process unravel, government participants suggested the need to be open to unexpected outcomes, which later become lessons. Finally, they also emphasised that it takes time in which different voices are allowed to come through to empower individuals and elevate the activity to greater heights than it would have reached had it excluded certain voices. In this vein, one participant spoke about people's constant need to rush, which, for this participant, risked resulting in tokenism.

Race

Though not frequently occurring, one government participant raised the issue of race as a factor that could have potentially influenced their interaction with other people. As Jemma recalled:

> *"In my ignorance*
> *I had not understood*
> *the dynamics around money.*
> *Being a young, white, English-speaking woman*
> *meant colonial overtones of controlling resources.*
> *I hadn't included;*
> *I hadn't allowed people*
> *to participate fully*
> *in owning the whole process."*

In this way, Jemma reflected and became aware of her race and position in relation to the community that she had nearly offended.

4.6 Participant feedback

4.6.1 In-person feedback session with residents

Even though it was disappointing to not have the majority of the original participants present during the feedback session, I took it as an opportunity to confirm whether the findings of the study based on the narratives represented the views of those who had not taken part in the narratives. In addition to discussing the themes presented out of the narrative interviews, and in recognition of the fact that the majority of the participants had not taken part in the research, I asked the participants in the feedback session what participation meant to them as well. The responses to that question are presented in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2: Outcomes of the feedback process held with Tsitsa Catchment residents

What is participation? (feedback session)	Experiences of participating in the TP
• Assisting or helping in what is happening • Having knowledge and sharing it with other people	• Gained interest in nature-related matters; e.g., rivers • Learned to stand in front of many people – realising that people do not bite, if you make a mistake they correct you

Growing as a person through encouragement • Wanting to solve other people's problems as your own • Solving a problem (generally) or volunteering • Being present and taking active part in community meetings • Believing in yourself • Sharing ideas	• Liked sleeping at BNB's (1st time) • Learned a lot from workshops and gained certificates • Able to solve some problems with the little they got • Learned how to speak to many people because as a CLO it was her job, as she used to be shy • Learned to tolerate others and have patience because the project is broad • Learned to work with people and gained experience of herd health by working with eco-rangers (e.g., considering the size of the animal before vaccinating, and where to inject) • Learned about fire management (and now creates awareness about the effects) • Being a CLO has made others believe in her (e.g., they ask "*What do you have for us today*?") • Working with white people makes it look like they have money • We are all different, but are treated equally – we all contribute to knowledge production

I first presented the findings of the study out of the narratives, and the participants made some comments affirming some of the themes and saying what they meant to them. The original themes were hope, recognition, learning and influencing decisions, and enabling and inhibiting factors (age, language, and race). The participants and I, with the help of an isiXhosa translator, went through an exercise of coming up with themes out of the ideas presented in Table 4.3 above. The themes we ended up with were knowledge, trust, respect, confidence, and love amongst others (Table 4.3), which they felt were not captured by the presented themes.

The last question asked was what their experiences of taking part in the TP were, and the feedback for the question is presented in Table 4.3. The participants in the feedback session felt that they had all participated equally in the project, even though everyone had different backgrounds and roles. The resident participants during the feedback session reiterated feeling that, once they had learned about the space, they could speak and feel heard. Learning out of the TP also came up during the feedback session as the participants mentioned that they had developed new interests out of their participation in the TP. For instance, one participant said, "*I gained interest in nature-related matters, for example, rivers*". Learning was similar to how it had come up in the narrative interviews, mainly related to learning public speaking and how to work with different people. Race also came up as an enabling factor, where the participants stated that working closely with white people gave them status and I quote, "*Working with white people makes it look like we have money*".

Given that the younger participants from the study raised concerns about lacking credibility in virtue of their age, we would assume that older participants would not lack confidence for the same reason; that they would be assigned credibility and epistemic authority as older members of the community. But interestingly, the issue of age for the elderly was different. Again, during the feedback session, they explained that they felt that they were sometimes also forced, or expected by the young people, to speak on matters that they did not have much knowledge of, and given a form of epistemic authority that became uncomfortable when they did not have an answer. In fact, the elderly felt that they always asked for young people's input in many cases, but the younger people felt that they were mainly asked to do things like writing and other errands that did not necessarily ask for their knowledge because of their age.

Fear of being laughed at by others also surfaced during the feedback session, where resident participants explained that part of their discomfort with speaking English was mainly around other black people because black people tend to laugh when one makes a grammatical error, unlike white people who help without making them feel embarrassed. This again raised the idea of feeling supported or not supported by those within the space that one participates in, further showing the relevance of human connection in influencing participation.

In addition to the comments relating to the themes, those who had taken part in this study gave verbal feedback on their work. The main comment in response to the question: "*Do you feel as though this is your story or do you feel misinterpreted?*" was: *"This is what I meant, and I am happy with the way it has been presented*." Another interesting finding was when one resident participant (Nolu) had read her poems out loud to the group, she went on to explain her poems and their meaning to the group. The translator then told me what she had said, and it was in line with how the poem had been interpreted.

4.6.2 Email and verbal feedback from researchers, implementers and government participants

Emails were sent to members of the rest of the stakeholder groups since they were in different places, and as already mentioned in the previous section (Section 4.6.1), the project had stopped being funded, and most people had gone on to do other jobs, which made it hard to set a time to meet as I did with the residents. Generally, the participants were amazed at the interesting ways in which their words had been played around with to develop the found poems. Jemma emailed back, "*What a beautiful and powerful thing you are doing. It was quite moving to see my words reflected back to me*." A comment such as this one further shows the power of poetry to elicit this "recognition" of an individual's voice more clearly than might have been possible with more of a prose-style representation.

The most interesting comment was from Kathy, who felt like she sounded very arrogant through the poetic representation of her narrative, even though she was happy with how her narrative was interpreted. Anna, on the other hand, engaged much further with her poems and made some changes where necessary, which was another helpful step and the purpose of showing each participant how their story had been interpreted. The goal of this highly qualitative study was to engage closely with the participants, and for them to reveal as much information as possible to me, knowing that I would, in turn, keep it safe and maintain the

integrity of each story. However, there were some limitations to this feedback process where I could no longer necessarily have the personal and deep conversations owing to budget and time constraints. All in all, the participants who managed to respond to me were satisfied with the interpretation of their words.

4.7 A comparative consideration of participant themes

This section represents the comparative view of the themes across the different participant categories. Table 4.3 shows a comparison of the emerging themes from participant group poems. It is interesting that even though the participants came from widely different walks of life, in the end, there were commonalities in recognising a meaningful participatory space (Figure 4.11). The main common themes are 1) human connection; 2) learning; 3) hope and frustration; and 4) recognition vs tokenism.

Table 4.3: A comparison of the emerging themes from participant group poems.

Themes	**Residents**	**Researchers**	**Implementers**	**Government officials**
Human connection:	X	X	X	X
Trust		X	X	
Finding your place		X	X	
Conversation as a 2-way street		X	X	
Part of a team		X	X	X
Support	X	X		
Common goal		X		X
Learning:				
Learning and understanding - empowered	X	X	X	X
Learning and adapting				

Inclusivity & diversity foster Learning vs homogenisation & marginalisation Learning related to contextual awareness		 X	X X	 X X
Hope and frustration	X	X	X	X
Recognition: Being seen Being heard (validated) Diversity and voice (inclusivity) **vs tokenism**	X X X X	X X X	X X	X X X
Contextual awareness (recognition)	X	X	X	X
Others: Age Language Money Participation context/the Role of the facilitator Race Time Overpowering individuals	 X X X X X	 X X X X X	 X	 X

Personal traits/ self-awareness			X	X

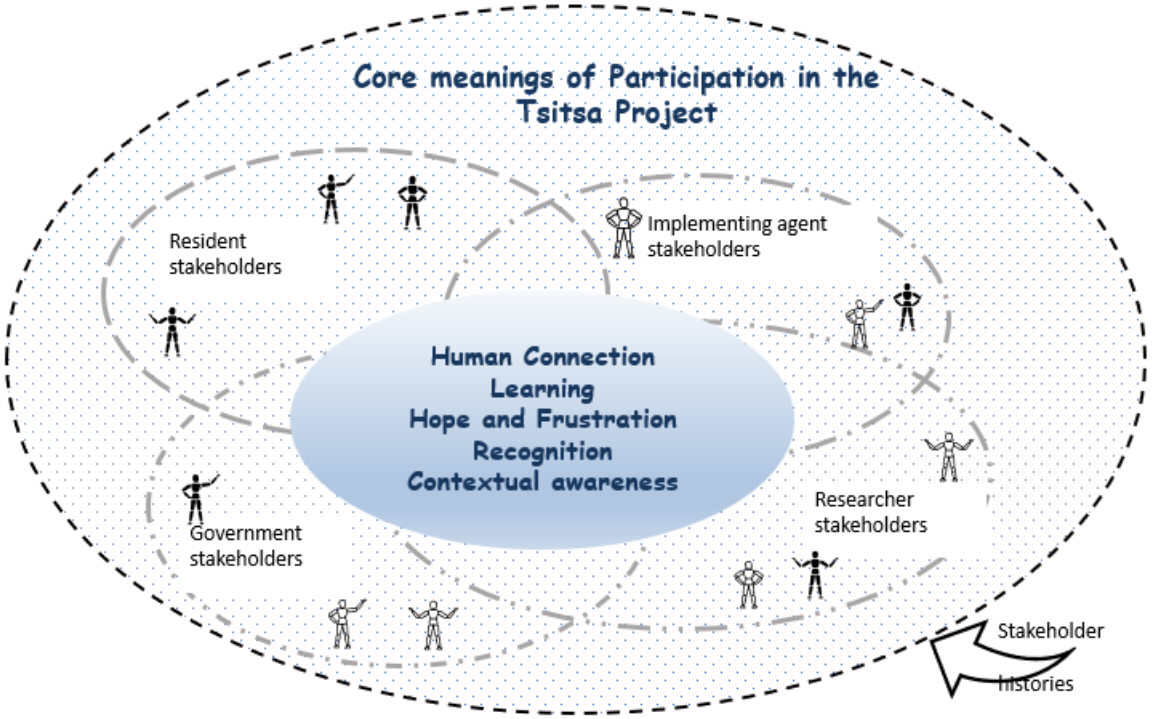


Figure 4. 11: An illustration of the core meanings of participation in the Tsitsa Project

1. Human connection

Human connection came up in all the participant categories. Researchers, implementers and government officials spoke about human connection in terms of being part of a team. In a team, each person had a role to play, and that finding what one's role was enabled participation. Having a role meant finding a place within the participatory space, or the team that one was a part of, and connecting with them through the roles that each of them played. Implementing agents and researchers also spoke about trust as something that is gained when people begin to connect and trust each other to play certain roles without "supervision". Trust became an important factor for these participants because they mentioned that it gave them the ability to let go of control and let other members of their team contribute to decision-making processes. According to researchers and government officials, a factor that seemed to enable the trust among teammates was the knowledge that

all were working towards a common goal, which is what connected them as a team in the first place. Having a common goal could be perceived as a connecting point in the participatory space, where no matter how differently they may have approached an issue, everyone remained supportive of each other.

In relation to trust, residents and researchers also referred to safety and support, how feeling supported by those around them within the participatory space gave them a sense of safety, and the confidence to express themselves freely. 'Having each other's backs' is what many participants seemed to yearn for in the participatory space in order to feel comfortable enough to speak freely, and that is what some participants felt within the TP space. Feeling supported allowed those who were shy to come out of their shells and begin to thrive and to start showing confidence that they never thought they had from the start. All the participants seemed to agree that participation was about open communication among those involved, and that part of the facilitator's duties was to find a balance in order to create space for reciprocal communication instead of one-way communication from one person to another.

In all, human connection emerged across all the participant groups as enabling participation by making people feel like they belong, and that they have filled some kind of gap within the participatory space to make it whole. Connecting with others on a human level also led to the development of trust, where people felt like they could trust others to work towards a common goal. It is also clear that feeling supported also provided a sense of security for the participants, which in turn gave them a new sense of confidence to express their agency within the participatory space.

2. Learning

The idea of learning came up in interesting ways across the different participant categories. For the residents, learning was mentioned mainly in terms of gaining new knowledge and skills, which left them feeling empowered and wanting to share with other people to empower the other people or just to raise awareness. Gaining enough information to contribute meaningfully and with better confidence also came up among the resident participants. In fact, for some of the resident participants, learning was a motivation for their participating in the TP.

For the researcher participants, implementer participants, and government officials, much of their learning was described in terms of contextual awareness, and how enabling it was for them once they had entered a new context, and had learned the rules and dynamics of how things were supposed to be done. Learning about their context gave them a certain level of freedom to participate, as long as it was within the boundaries of the rules in context. Learning also surfaced as a result of being inclusive of and recognising the diversity of voices within the participatory space for the implementers. For all the participant categories, learning usually led to adapting as the participants mentioned certain shifts in the way they acted after gaining new information.

3. Hope and frustration

Hope was mentioned in relation to altruism. For instance, residents had hope to better themselves as individuals, hope for their families, and for their communities, while the other groups had hoped to help and bring positive changes in the lives of the people who they interacted with in different participatory spaces, particularly in the TP space. Hope was inferred in the implementer participants' stories, where it appeared that they had entered the TP space with certain expectations of being able to do their job, only to be delayed by the teams who came before them, thereby causing frustration. Generally, frustration across all the stakeholder groups came up as a result of things not going as expected or as hoped by the participants.

What was clear across all the groups was that hope became the motivation for many of the participants' involvement in the activities that they were engaged in, including the TP. Hope could be said to be a starting point for people's involvement in participatory activities, hope for what the activity could potentially lead to as a result of the involvement of different people.

4. Recognition

Another prominently occurring theme was recognition. The residents mentioned recognition in terms of being seen, a metaphor for invisibility, interestingly mentioned by the residents who belong to a marginalised group in South Africa. Input being heard and even validated as valuable occurred for both residents and researchers, both of whom felt more confident when they were recognised for their input. Participation for them was about being able to

speak and be listened to, where the residents added “without interruption”. For implementers and government officials, recognition was more closely related to inclusivity and recognition of the diverse voices in the space. Recognition of other people’s voices also occurred among researchers, but not as prominently as it did in the other two participant categories. Implementers, researchers and government officials referred to being inclusive of different people to become part of the team, with each individual recognised for their role within the team. Each person, they argued, needs to be trusted and respected in their role. Residents also spoke about recognition in terms of respect, that in the TP, they felt respected in different ways, one being age, where they felt respected and cared for as elders. Even those who had felt unheard or silenced within their communities owing to their age felt seen and listened to within the TP. Recognition was also evident as giving status to the residents, as they felt that being selected to take part in certain activities gave them status among fellow residents. A further sense of status came from being seen by the community when the TP participants left the village for activities in other areas, especially sleeping in town at different B&Bs, which they saw as a sign of being employed, unlike always being seen within the village. In a way, constant presence within the village in their context is not a marker that one has a job; having a job means leaving the village.

Recognition was coupled with tokenism, which residents related to age, where younger participants, especially male participants, felt silenced by older people who did not believe that a younger person could give them good advice, possibly due to their lack of experience. Both residents and researchers spoke about issues relating to language, and the negative experience of being in a space where the language used was not familiar. Both spoke about how feeling excluded as they could hardly follow the discussion, let alone make fully informed contributions. For one resident participant (Aya), the issue related to language was accent, where she struggled to follow the discussion in an earlier TP engagement because the meeting was dominated by white people, whom she described as speaking fast. The residents and researchers also raised the issue of race, but in different ways. Residents felt intimidated when they first started working with white people, but at the same time, they felt that white people held the answers to their problems, a form of tokenistic behaviour, where a person is not recognised for who they are individually, but rather assumptions are made about them

based on the social group they belong to. In this way, white people were given excessive credibility by the residents.

Tokenism was also mentioned in terms of individuals who overpower the participatory space, leaving limited space for others to contribute, or even directly dismissing other people's inputs. Residents felt that the TP making all the plans for activities outside of the catchment left no room for them, as residents, to contribute to how things could be done. Implementing agents and many researchers also voiced difficulty expressing themselves freely upon first entering the TP space because they found the space already occupied by people who had established some form of understanding of how they worked.

Other enabling or inhibiting factors: age; language; context; race; time; overpowering individuals; and personal traits

Other factors were also mentioned across the participant categories that influenced their participation. A prominent one was language; there were some tensions concerning the use of languages that were not understood by all those involved. On the one hand, those researchers and the residents for whom English was not their first language experienced frustration over their inability to fully or comfortably express themselves, or to follow the discussion in the foreign language. On the other hand, some non-isiXhosa speakers among the researchers had difficulty following the discussion when they could not understand the language being used, which led to some of them developing observation skills to try to keep up.

Although overpowering individuals were only explicitly described under by researchers, others, such as residents, felt that LIMA and the researchers came to the table having already made most decisions, leaving little space for them, and implementers who that the researchers had overpowered them when they first entered the TP space, thereby shutting down all their ideas. By the researcher participants, overpowering individuals were explicitly described as those people within the participatory space who allow people to speak, but hardly acknowledged their contribution before moving on to the next point.

Race was an issue raised by residents, researchers and government officials. Residents felt both hope and intimidation by the presence of white people in the TP; hope that they (white people) had the ability to make things happen, but intimidated that they might not be able to

communicate effectively with them due to their low comprehension of English. On the other hand, some of the white people realised that they had a certain privilege over the black people, which could be used productively to enforce certain actions. That is, they realised that the black people tended to listen to them better than to their black colleagues. One government official experienced the results of their privilege in an encounter with a black community project where they had nearly insulted the people by failing to fully involve them in the daily financial operations of the programme, because as she phrased it

> *"Being a young, white, English-speaking woman*
> *meant colonial overtones of controlling resources."*

Money was mentioned as an enabler for the residents, some of whom were disappointed when they realised that their stipends were not what they had expected, based on previous experience, while some (women) gained a level of recognition in their families for their financial contribution from of the project. Personal traits such as shyness and confidence came up as inhibiting and enabling, respectively. For many of the participants, it was the facilitator's role to ensure an enabling participatory environment where everyone was comfortable and encouraged to speak.

4.8 A critical realist lens

Here I use the comparative results to suggest a model for meaningful participation. There is a clear CSES-based understanding that context is central to shaping system function. However, in this research there is evidence of a deeper underlying 'humanity' of response and meaning in relation to participation that operates at a more foundational level than the overlying context. In Chapter 2, I raised the possibility that the use of poetic inquiry has the potential to reach the deeper 'real' critical realism level. The commonality of themes that emerged across all the groups of participants – despite their clearly different roles and contexts within the Tsitsa River catchment CSES – is evidence that the poetic inquiry has achieved that.

The recognition of a deeper reality reveals an opportunity to use the common themes as powerful mechanisms for equitable and effective participation planning and design. It is promising that the groups of participants in this research come from groups that are commonly involved in NRM engagement namely: government-science-society (Turton et al., 2007), plus implementers in the TP case.

Out of this emergence and recognition I suggest a 'model' for meaningful participation (Figure 4.12), where i) the themes of human connection, learning and recognition confer 'meaning', ii) out of this meaning emerges hope, and iii) hope encounters inevitable frustration in the 'empirical and actual' levels of reality where events are experienced.

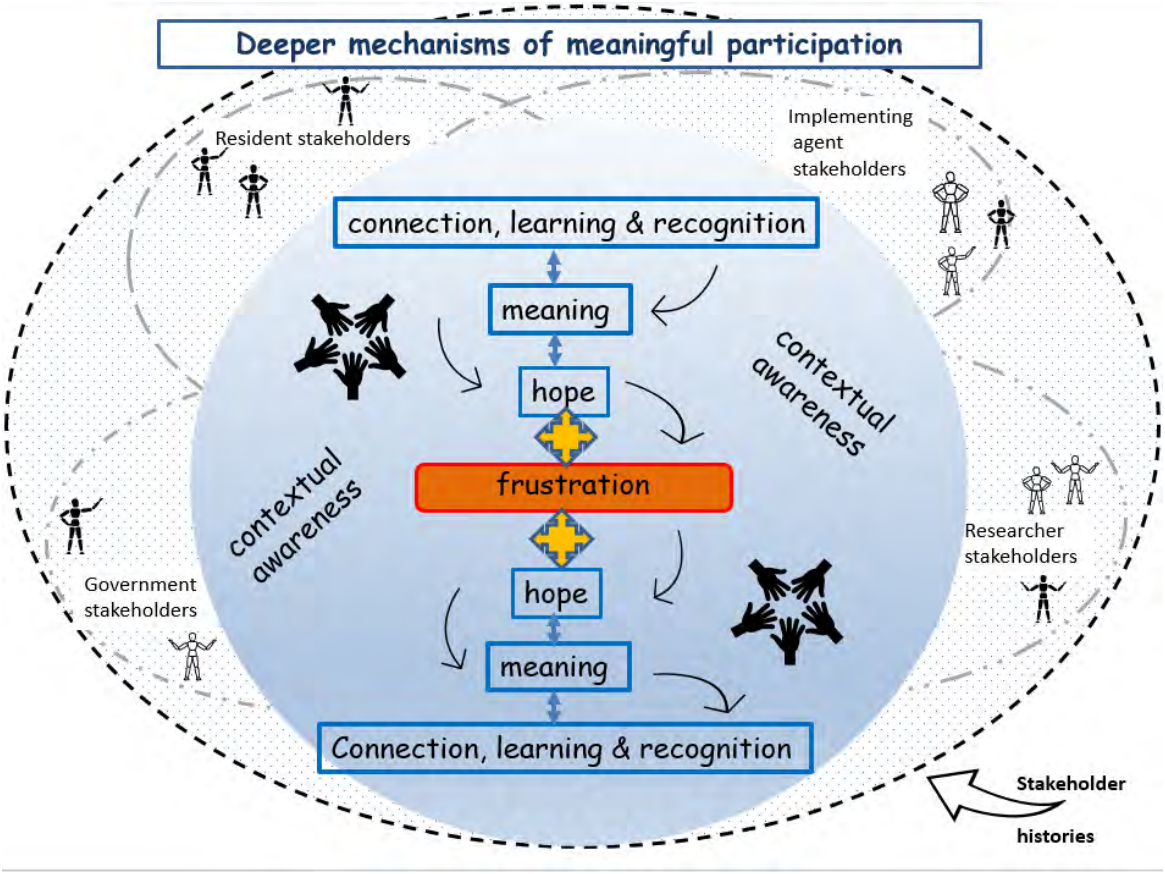


Figure 4.12: A model for meaningful participatory interventions developed out of the common themes that emerged across widely differing Tsitsa Project groups. The empirical experience and expression of frustration is represented as a surface indicator, with participatory interventions that foundationally build connection and recognition through learning, and consequently build meaning and hope, offering a deeper and more enduring response to frustration than attending to the immediate causes of frustration.

This model contributes a more synthetic image and understanding on which to base generative participation than, for example, the linear participatory 'ladder' image (Arnstein, 1969). The model image is aligned with a complex social-ecological system (CSES) understanding and can form a basis for designing participation that is attentive to underlying causal mechanisms that drive meaningful participation.

Planning and design for more just and effective participation in NRM engagement

The following section explores practical ways the four drivers (causal mechanisms) of effective participation could be implemented.

Encouraging connection

Out of the findings, it is apparent that the following are some of the factors that encourage human connection: An enabling environment, where participants felt that their input is genuinely needed. Feeling supported by others and supporting each other within the participatory space, or not feeling judged encourages human connection. Using a language that participants understand also came up as fostering connection among the participants as it allows for them to express themselves better. Having a common purpose and common interests fostered connection within the participatory space. Listening carefully to what other people say allows you to connect with them at a deeper level that then allows you to approach them in ways that are more relatable to them, including with one's use of language. Careful listening allowed for people from different backgrounds, and people with diverse interests to connect by understanding where each person was coming from, and where their interests lay.

Human connection within a participatory space could further be fostered through regular interaction around similar interests. For example, in the TP case, the implementers felt that connection with the catchment communities was nurtured firstly, by the selection of the members of the community to act as a bridge between the community and the TP. The implementers believed that having those different members, such as the community liaison officers (CLOs), allowed the TP team to connect better with the communities and to identify their relevant needs in relation to the vision of the overall project. Secondly, the implementer participants felt that the strategic placement of one of the implementing agents within the catchment was a good way to maintain good relationships with the communities. The fact that the person who was placed within the catchment was a local-language speaker was an added advantage as it enabled open communication for the communities. Careful building of relationships of trust was also mentioned as enabling human connection, where trusting those within the space enabled one to feel comfortable enough to participate. Working face-to-face also allowed people to read each other's faces and determine when they might have something to say or not, especially people who were too shy to raise their hands and needed

a little boost by being chosen without raising their hand. The idea of reading people's faces would be a challenge when working remotely on Zoom with the video off.

Encouraging learning

Being open, curious and eager about what the space could potentially bring enabled participants to learn. A flexible space that allows for diverse perspectives encouraged learning. Generously sharing knowledge and skills fostered learning among the different participants. Some participants mentioned that focusing on topics of interest opened them up to want to learn more. Being reflexive formed a significant part of learning and adapting. The participants seemed to agree, or be aware, that things would not always go as planned, and this awareness enabled them to be open to learning as they went along. The involvement of different stakeholders with different skills and expertise fostered learning. Having previous experience enabled the participants to be open to learning and adapting to new and diverse participatory spaces. Having sufficient and clear information was enabling for them to proceed in a participatory manner.

For those who participated in other people's spaces, especially the researchers, implementers and government officials, having the desire to learn about their new context became the driver for learning, especially learning the social dynamics that influenced the participatory culture of their new context. Some participants learned from the painful experience of having been ignorant or unaware of the dynamics of their context. Participants tended to experience a journey of self-discovery in this new setting; they learnt new things about themselves in terms of who they are and what they stand for.

Using recognition to encourage meaningful participation

Participant feedback included that being picked or selected encouraged a sense of being seen, especially when a person was too shy to raise their hand. Selection was a metaphor for visibility. Being picked in this way meant that the facilitator recognised the participants' capabilities. Verbal acknowledgement of input was also a sign that participant input was valuable in the space. There was both genuine and superficial acknowledgement, where genuine acknowledgement was in many cases accompanied by one's point being noted – on a workshop sheet up on a wall, or noted and reflected back to the participants, whereas superficial acknowledgement ended up feeling tokenistic. Another form of recognition was

respect, where recognising each person for who they were was a sign of respect, whereas mis-recognition, such as generalising or making assumptions, was experienced as disrespect.

Being inclusive of all parties concerned and recognising the different interests and roles that were represented within the participatory space emerged as enhancing the chance of participants recognising the different contributions that were made in the space. Implementing agents specifically highlighted the need to be cognisant of those who are usually marginalised within society, and to ensure that their views and beliefs are recognised and incorporated into any decisions made. Recognition also came up in relation to finding a place/role in that having a recognised role or position within a participatory space implies that one's voice is recognised. Being considerate of the local dynamics (context) also guides the outsiders facilitating a participatory programme on the modes of engagement that can be used to encourage and capture the attention of the local people. Generally, recognition can be fostered through inclusivity, respect and understanding each participant for who they are, not the group they belong to.

How to engage with the emergence of frustration

Most importantly, package participatory engagement messages in an open and honest manner to avoid raising expectations, including what the limitations of an initiative are. For instance, being explicit that a project will not provide job opportunities is vital. In the TP it was useful to emphasise participation as an opportunity for learning. Where possible, allow space for the expression of concerns and expectations at the beginning of the process, so as to know how to be sensitive to different concerns, and touch on topics of interest where possible. For instance, the TP worked in a poverty-stricken area, and the inclusion of livelihood development was important.

Summary

For learning to take place, a participatory space needs to be created that allows access to and is inclusive of people from diverse backgrounds. The participatory space exists in a particular context, which influences things such as what language and methods are used to ensure inclusivity. The diversity that is found within a participatory space fosters learning owing to the unique nature of each contribution being shared. Put differently, different voices and diversity foster learning – gaining new knowledge and skills – which transforms thinking and

acting, and helps when adapting to changing and challenging environments. Allowing for diverse interests and knowledge types to come together can lead to transformation in participants' understanding and perception of the world; that is, a person's interests may change or transform through their interactions with new ideas learned from other actors in the space (Ison, 2010; Rettberg, 2005; Turnhout, Bomel and Aarts, 2010). Learning then leads to adaptation.

Through the new knowledge and skills learned in the space that was created, people tended to experience shifts in how they perceived certain things (they adapted). These shifts were the result of understanding the way certain experiences and phenomena were explained by others in the participatory space, which related to some past experiences that one may not have been able to explain. Adjusting one's way of viewing certain topics based on what one has learnt through interactions with others allows one, again, to find a place and role within the space, which again, increases the confidence of the individual in the new space, encouraging them to speak or participate more.

Having a role or a place resulted in making more contributions, some of which are recognised by those within one's space. Being recognised for one's contributions in the space further increased participants' confidence as credible knowers, which in turn motivated them to participate to a greater extent. Forming human connections within a participatory space further allowed participants to find their place as relationships of trust were built wherein they felt safe and supported by the people around them. In short, human connection played a significant role in enabling participants to experience themselves as relevant members of a team working towards a common goal. Having a common goal fostered human connection.

Tokenistic behaviour emerged as what most people feared within the participatory space, as it meant that their contribution would not have any impact on decisions made. This meant that participants' hopes of influencing positive change were not fulfilled, and led to frustration.

Confidence seems to play a vital role in participants' willingness and ability to participate. The participants gained confidence through learning and understanding their context, and connecting with the people in the space, which in turn, led to adapting, and ultimately finding a place. When one has found their place, it gives them the confidence to feel that what they say is valuable to the overall process, which motivates them to want to contribute.

Participants found that being recognised for their contributions in their unique roles also boosted their confidence in the participatory space. Confidence was mostly in relation to participants' epistemic contributions, in terms of whether these were good enough, where low confidence was mostly related to lacking the mannerisms or the concepts to fit in with the rest. Validation was the reward, and a sign of being heard when they spoke.

The emergence of the common themes summarised here gave rise to what we have called a model of participation, where human connection, learning and recognition give meaning for the participants, and out of this meaning comes hope, which in turn hits frustration as things tend to not go as initially planned in the participatory space.

In Chapter 5 I reflect on my findings in the light of the literature and the framing in Chapter 2 to consider how developing the model of effective participation has

1) advanced/deepened our understanding of participation; and
2) contributed to more just and effective practice.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In this discussion, I reiterate my central line of argument and conceptual understanding and then discuss the findings, firstly in relation to the Tsitsa Project (TP) participant groups, and secondly as an integrated participatory system. I conclude with recommendations for effective participatory governance development that arise from the findings.

The findings of this study allowed me to highlight my participants' voices and provide a guide to what enabled or hindered participation within the given TP context. Critical realism through the iceberg metaphor allowed me to go beyond the surface level of participation (e.g., of observing numbers of participants) to uncover the deeper forces shaping the TP participatory system through poetic voice. The poetic voice amplified the participants' voices so that the underlying mechanisms and structures that might be shaping participation in the TP could surface, especially the invisible feelings and emotions brought to the fore through the poems.

5.1 A line of argument

This research emerges from my contention that "*effective participation is needed to attain the goal of developing participatory governance to support progress towards increased*

sustainability outcomes from natural resource management (NRM). However, the capacity to ensure effective participation and develop participatory governance is weak. If people are to be empowered to make decisions for themselves and to assess decisions made, participation development is crucial for participatory decision-making or self-determination in NRM processes" (Chapter 1, Section 1.3).

I have viewed participants in the Tsitsa Project as a complex social-ecological system (CSES):

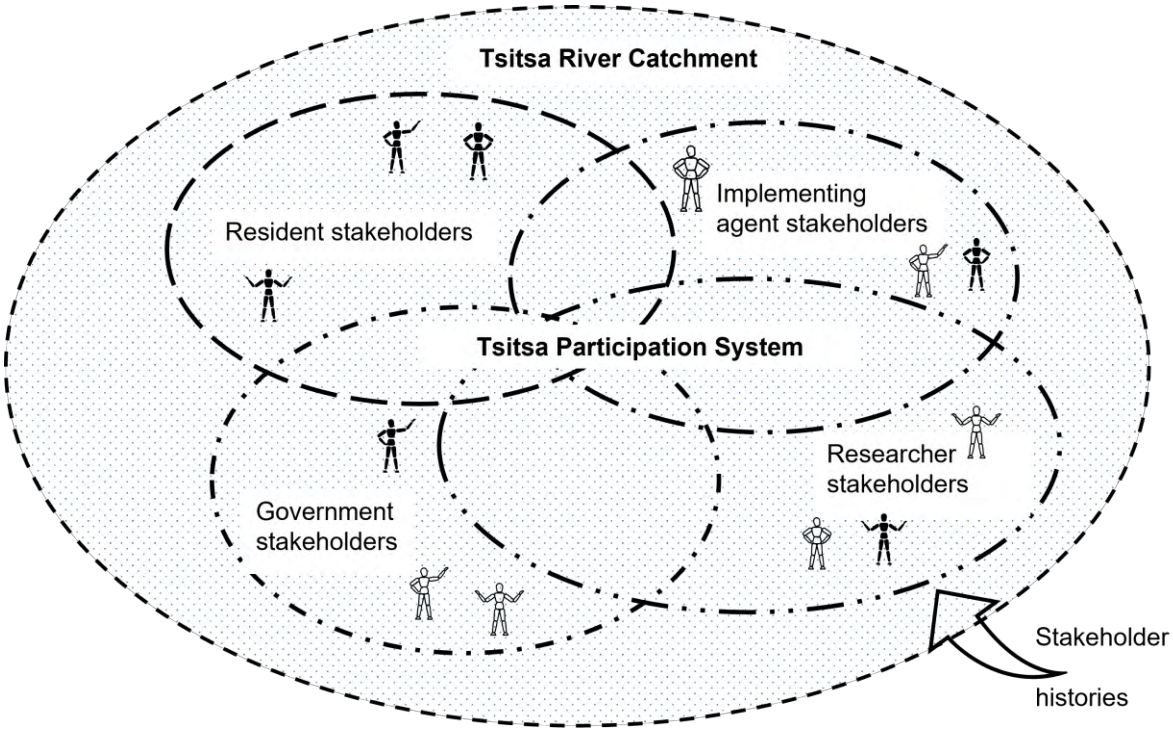


Figure 5.13. A modified repeat of Figure 3.4 – interacting Tsitsa Project participant groups as embedded elements of the biophysical catchment (Section 3.1.1).

I have used critical realism (Baskar, 1994; Lawami, 2021; Cockburn, 2021), (Figure 2.2, Section 2.5) to undertake a layered analysis of the narratives of participation experience, moving from the oral narratives to found poems.

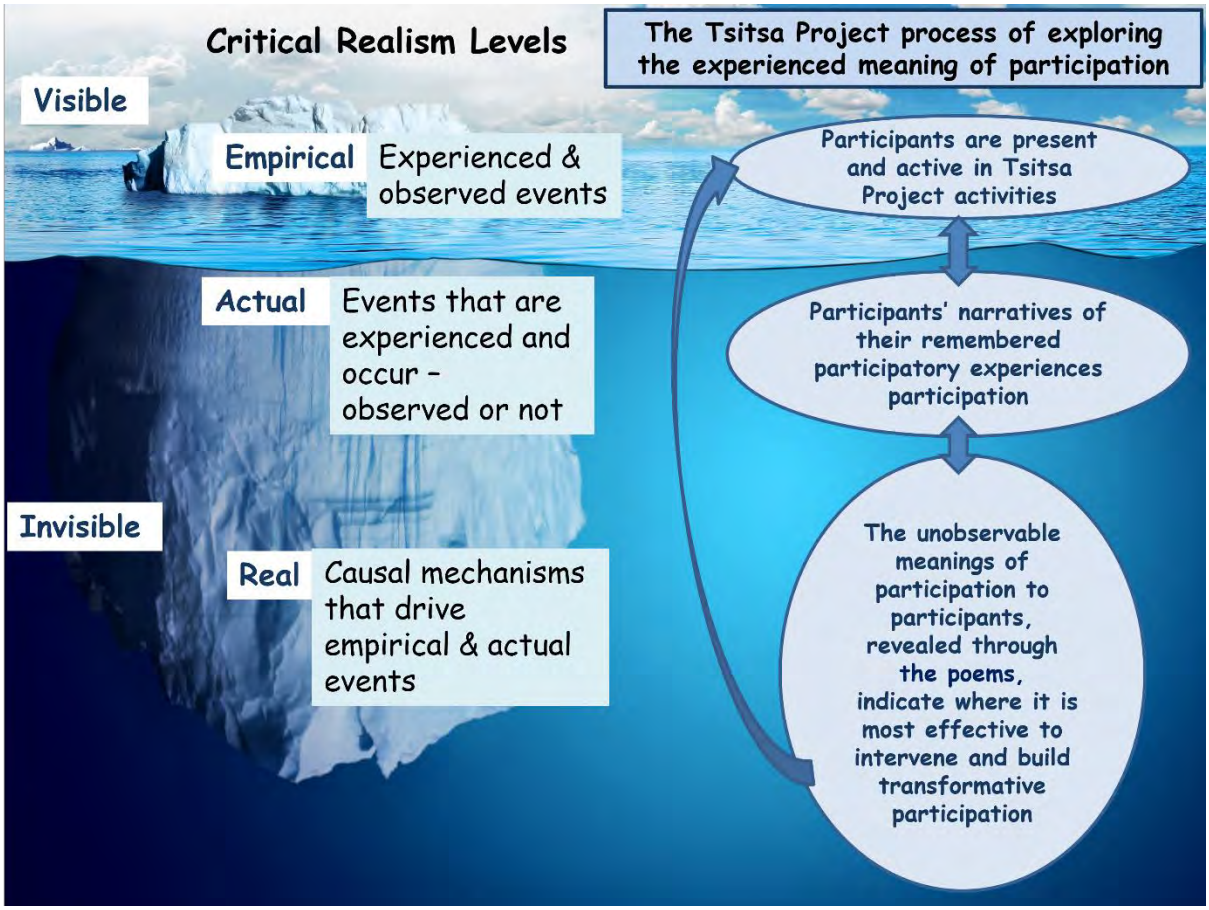


Figure 14: Repeat of Figure 2.4. A diagram relating levels of critical realism to the participatory process, seeking mechanisms that drive meaningful participation, from the existential experience of participation to poems that reveal the ways in which participants found meaning through participation (section 2.5.2).

The core themes emerging from the poems were: hope and frustration, human connection, learning, recognition, and contextual awareness (Figure 4.11)

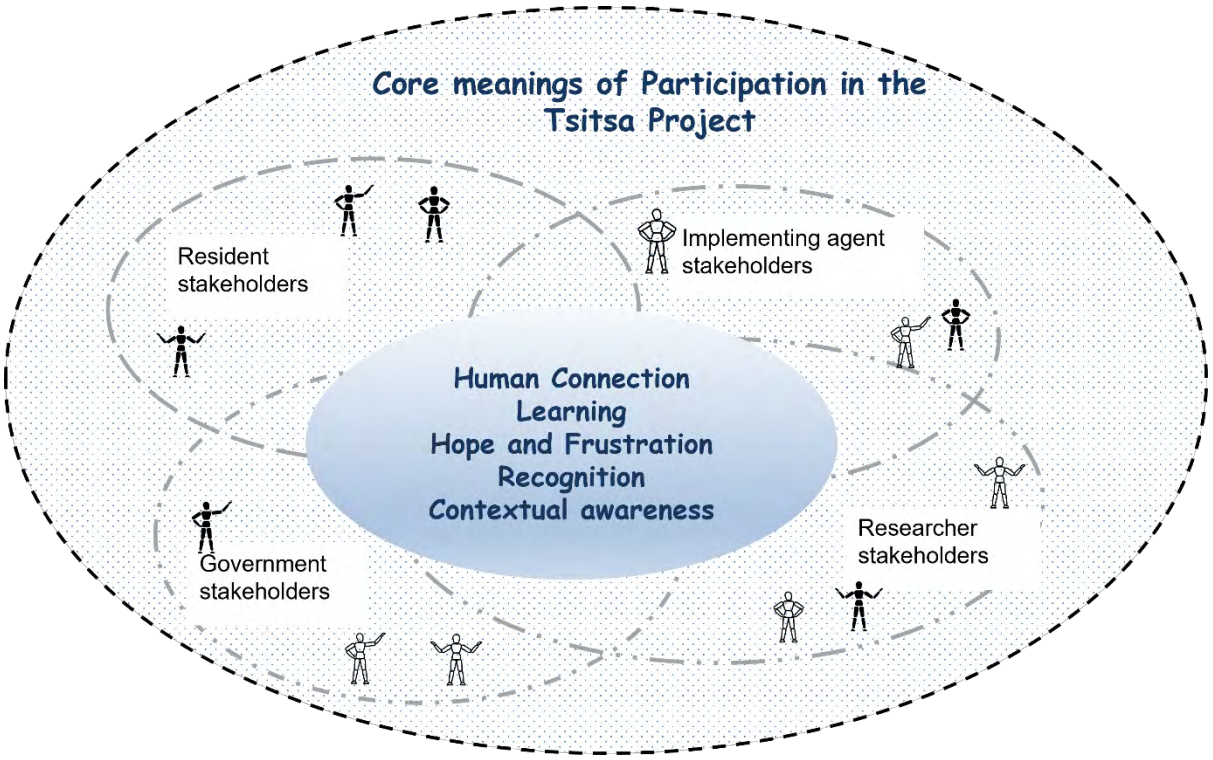


Figure 15.3: Repeat of Figure 4.11, showing the core meanings of participation that emerged from the thematic analysis of the individual poems per category (Section 4.7).

After immersion in the multi-layered process of analysis (Chapter 3), and the discovery of deep themes, I sought to make sense of the themes, coming to a 'model' of the participatory experience in the TP.

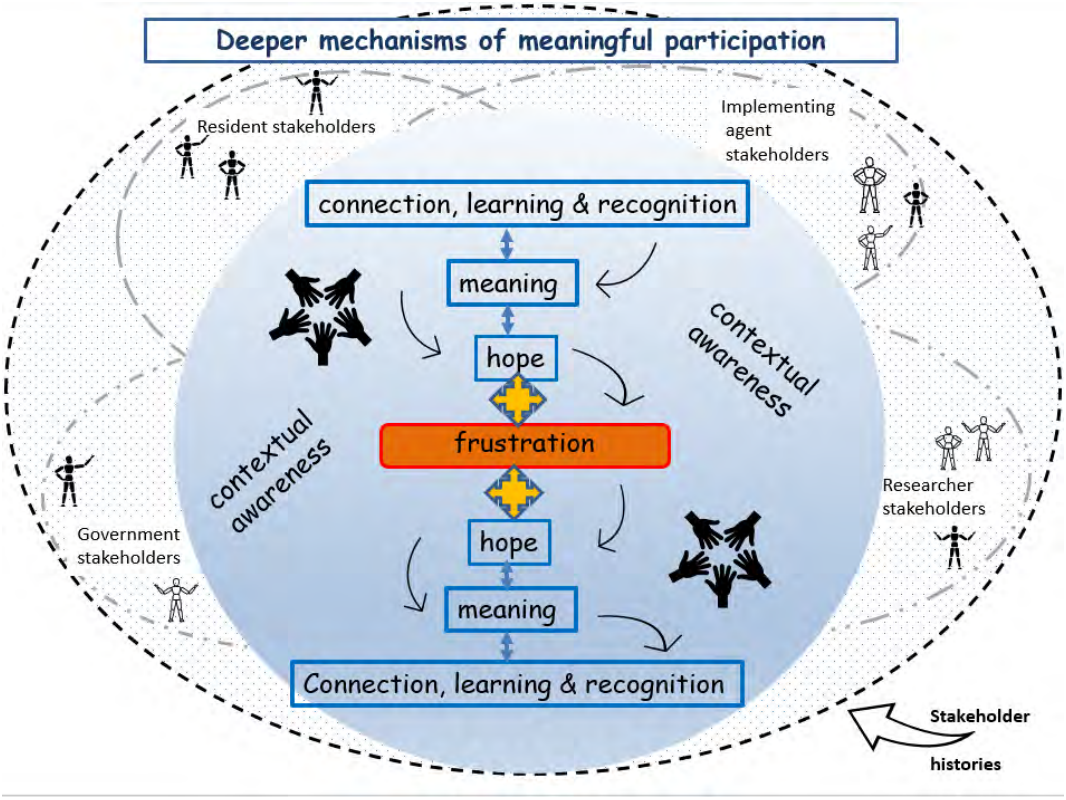


Figure 16: Repeat of Figure 4.12: My interpretation of a layered understanding of what participation meant to Tsitsa Project participants. Close to the surface bubble are many experiences of frustration. Underneath is the experience of hope – it is when hope is dashed that intense frustration emerges. The hope was not groundless; it emerged from a sense that participation is meaningful and offers opportunities – even if those are hard to realise. The sense of meaningfulness is grounded in human connection, learning, and recognition. This provides the basis for designing both participation and management follow-up after participatory engagements. The participation events are not the end but rather the beginning of developing participatory governance.

I start by discussing participant-group experiences.

5.2 Participant group experiences

5.2.1 Residents

(The quotes used in this section were taken from Section 4.2.1)

At its best, participation for the residents is about the fulfilment of hopes and desires for the betterment of themselves, and their communities and institutions. Engaging in decision-making processes regarding their resources empowers communities to contribute to positive changes. Participation allows stakeholders to envision a future where sustainable practices are prioritised and livelihoods are improved (Pretty, 1995). The idea of hope as a driver for community participation in natural resource management is supported by Imana and Mmbali's 2016 case study of North Western Kenya, where they envisioned incentives for community participation in natural resource management. Hope as the motivation for participation is also found in other contexts, such as clinical cancer trials (Godskesen *et al*., 2015) and political studies (Head, 2007).

Tschakert and St. Clair (2013) suggest that hope is crucial in participatory processes as it fosters a positive outlook on the future and motivates stakeholders to engage meaningfully. The Tsitsa catchment residents hoped for positive changes and the betterment of themselves and their communities. In line with the model of participation, the resident participants experienced hope in anticipation of what the outcomes of their involvement in the different activities would bring towards realising the betterment of their communities. In relation to the TP in particular, the residents seemed to frame their motivation for participation around money and job opportunities, in addition to their hope for the restoration of the gullies. Rai *et al*. (2022) discuss how hope is critical in sustaining long-term engagement in community-based resource management, particularly when communities face environmental degradation.

The presence of white people in the research team made race quite a significant factor in the participation of the residents. On the one hand, the presence of white people gave residents hope that they would soon see positive results, but on the other hand, it was intimidating for them owing to the language barrier. For instance, Nkosi said, "*When we saw white people, we were hopeful – that after the research they would ensure implementation, help us as a*

community bring opportunities, create jobs and skills – because they get things done". According to Seekings and Nattrass (2005), Badat and Sayed (2014), and Southall (2022) the belief among some black South Africans that white people are more capable is largely shaped by the enduring legacy of apartheid, economic disparities, and historical access to education and resources. This means that the residents tend to look to white people for solutions, which might mean that they either exaggerated hope that they could finally get answers to their challenges, or under-expressed their agency because they felt intimidated by the presence of these powerful people who might know more than they did owing to their access to resources. Application of the critical realist view brought some of these deeply ingrained power dynamics to the fore.

In terms of language, residents expressed some frustration over feeling pressured to speak English, a language they did not necessarily feel very proficient in, and how it prevented them from fully expressing themselves. This is in line with Gautam and Jasim (2025), who found that lack of language proficiency not only brings challenges in terms of understanding discussions, but also in terms of the difficulty in expressing ideas clearly and effectively, which may limit participants from engaging fully and meaningfully. In a publication I have co-authored, Palmer *et al*. (2022), in response to the realisation that English was not the most effective language to use in the TP, Learning Words workshops were conducted in isiXhosa, after which we observed improved participation by the residents, the majority of whom were not very proficient in English. The participants did express that they preferred to speak their own language, and as Nolu said, "*I was not comfortable speaking English – I cannot express myself fully – I wanted to give up and quit; I prefer to speak my home language*". And so, the shift to using isiXhosa as the primary language used to conduct workshops indeed enabled more of the participants to express themselves and improved their participation.

Dressler et al. (2019) submits that by fostering optimism about the future, hope encourages sustained participation and collective action, which is essential in the context of CSES, which usually require much trial and error to manage. However, if participatory processes do not deliver on the hope they inspire in participants, as is usually the case with CSESs (Much and Streit, 2020), then this can lead to frustration and disengagement. Snyder and Lopez (2002) suggest that hope is about having goals and that, sometimes, there are obstructions to

attaining these goals, which may lead to negative emotions such as frustration. As depicted in the model above, many of the participants' hopes were dashed when things did not take place as they had expected. Most of their frustrations arose from feeling inhibited from achieving these aspirations, which implies that their frustration came as a result of the gap between their hopes and the attainment of their hopes. Limited opportunities to participate in activities that could potentially influence real changes in their communities due to the inaccessibility of their area (Fry, 2023) could also be a reason behind the frustration expressed by resident participants. The Capabilities Pathway (Palmer *et al*., 2022 envisioned moving towards real influence, but the TP was prematurely terminated.

Moreover, a lack of resources, such as money to fund development initiatives, was mentioned as a factor that caused frustrations for this group. Dressler *et al*. (2019) recommend that when expressing optimism, participants should take into account the context of the participatory activity, including political and economic circumstances, to ensure that their goals are realistic. This means that keeping hopes and expectations within achievable bounds is determined by contextual awareness and could be useful in preventing frustration among participants, which may help sustain participation in the long run. Note here that the research team continually emphasised the limitations of the TP in material advancement – repeatedly alerting participants to learning and knowledge and their ability to use those as the primary contribution of the governance development work.

While some residents were motivated by the money received, others found the small amount to be a frustrating issue, particularly since they had hoped to use it to support their families. Not surprisingly, in the TP context, where job opportunities are limited, expectations rise when there is any chance of job creation. Cleaver (2012) suggests that such incentives are particularly important in rural contexts where resource scarcity limits the ability of people to engage in collective action. Even though some authors have expressed concern about the potential for monetary rewards to undermine people's intrinsic motivation to participate, this was not the case in the TP, as the participants ended up staying. As Nkosi said, "*We were excited after a long time without work – looking forward to being able to feed our families. But the money was not much. These challenges made me look at it differently, but I stayed because I liked it, it was in capable hands"* (Section 4.2.1). Part of the reason for staying could

have been the TP's potential, as the quote above mentions "capable hands", but another reason appears to be that the TP offered them a chance to improve their skills. For instance, Nkosi also remarked: "*I also wanted to participate to develop skills and influence decisions. We learnt a lot about nature – were educated about veld fires. People were generous with their knowledge– helping to develop the community"*. This finding is in line with finding by Leventon *et al*. (2019) and Chambers (2005) that participatory programmes that balance financial rewards with capacity-building initiatives foster long-term community engagement and ownership, or sustainable and meaningful participation.

For some, the selection of a few people for paid positions led to an experience of conflict and a lack of support from their communities. An interesting comment was made in this regard by one participant that referring to the TP as a project created many of the issues because the term 'project' is associated with immediate job creation in the context. In Themba's words, "*When you address the people they don't care about that, all they want to know is how they were left behind… They chased me around, I swear, and many hurtful words were said… It shouldn't have been referred to as a project; people here hear 'project' they think of employment*". On the one hand, this comment highlights the importance of context awareness as indicated by the model (Figure 5.4), in terms of the terminology used. On the other hand, the conflict over payment and the lack of support for those being paid is a possible case of extrinsic motivation overriding intrinsic motivation, which suggests that the reliance on monetary incentives, as stated by Pretty and Ward (2001), does cause conflict and mistrust due to the perception of unequal benefit distribution.

Another frustration, which relates to epistemic injustice as one of the concepts of interest for this study, came out of feeling ignored, dismissed, silenced, or interrupted when speaking. Given that many of the participants described participation as being about speaking, it comes as no surprise that being silenced would frustrate them since they expected to speak. It is clear, as the model indicates, that being invited to participate sparks hope in people, but this hope gives rise to frustration when reality emerges, and things do not go as hoped or expected. The common thread in this framing of participation is the participants' ability to express themselves in the spaces that they consider participatory. Having hope to influence

change for the better implies having an opportunity to speak with the hope of influencing decisions for positive change.

Despite frustration, the hope expressed above seemed to be brought about by the meaning of participation to the participants. For the resident participants, meaning was created through their connections with others within the participatory space, lessons learned that could be shared with others (learning), and recognition of their individual efforts and capabilities. All these took place within context-specific circumstances.

The residents, in their hope for what the TP could bring, found meaning of their participation. They found that the human connections (an underlying mechanism in Figure 5.3) formed through their engagement with other people gave them meaning to continue, even through their frustrations. Connecting with others resulted in their ability to speak because they knew they had the support of others within the space. Ryff and Singer (2000) suggest that people are more likely to engage actively when they feel emotionally connected to others in the group. Human connection also gave meaning to the participants in the form of words of encouragement that empowered them to contribute.

Being picked without raising their hand indicated a bond that the participants felt with the facilitator, which encouraged the participants because they felt like they were seen. In Bongile's words: "*– they just ask, "Bongile, do you have anything to say?" Sometimes I do have something to say; it makes me comfortable, I feel more confident because you can see me, you can read me. I think I misjudge myself. Doubting if it's really correct*". The resident participants preferred face-to-face encounters, as these enabled facilitators to observe their facial expressions and recognise when they had things to say but were too afraid to raise their hands. The connection between the facilitator and the participants enabled the participants to feel recognised, improving their confidence to participate. This means that human connection and recognition break some power barriers between participants and facilitators, making for more meaningful participation.

The role of the facilitator was also the basis of human connection for the participants as they could encourage or nudge them to speak. Christakis and Fowler (2009) found that strong human connections can foster inclusivity by ensuring that diverse voices are heard and

respected. This was true for the resident participants, as they repeatedly mentioned feeling respected by the TP team. For instance, Nkosi explained: "*Tom enables us to influence decisions the most. He is patient and respectful and gentle – helps people relax and feel able to contribute. Even if they think what they have to say does not matter he encourages people to participate"*. This is also evident in Nolu's narrative when she remarked: "*Attending the Tsitsa workshops, what I liked most is the respect we are given* –". In this way, respectful interactions enhanced the resident participants' experience of participation, further giving them meaning and a purpose to stay.

Human connection also gave meaning to their participation in the form of support from others within the participatory space. Words of encouragement, especially from those whom the participant considered more powerful, created a conducive participatory environment for them. In this way, epistemic justice was promoted, since with the support and encouragement from other people, the resident participants found it easier to express themselves within the participatory space. Participants made remarks about feeling afraid to speak or doubting themselves, yet words of encouragement gave them the courage to perform at their best. For instance, Themba said, "*People had a desire for me to thrive, encouraging me to apply for other positions – "Why don't you explore other opportunities?" That empowered me"* (Section 4.2.1). The quote refers to experiences prior to the TP, but prior experiences potentially allowed the participants to rely on similar cues in the TP to overcome initial fears.

Putman (2000) suggests that human connection helps create a supportive environment where individuals feel valued and understood. An enabling environment in the manner of support and encouragement by facilitators or other participants also formed part of the resident participants' framing of participation. The resident participants referred to facilitators who respectfully invited them to speak, and how that made them feel like equal contributors in the space. Respect plays a vital role in the participants' views about participation; it was also mentioned in relation to being respected as elderly women, and again when one participant felt disrespected by a generalising (homogenising) facilitator (Section 4.2.1: Participants 3 and 4). Human connection can therefore foster inclusivity by

ensuring that diverse voices are heard and respected, which is essential for participatory governance.

The presence of fellow participants provided either a safe space for speaking, or a constraint. Participants did not raise their group concerns when they knew that others would not speak in support of them when the facilitators were around (Section 4.2.1: Participant 2). This feeling of intimidation shows the uneven power dynamics that existed and inhibited the freedom of participants to speak when they felt they might not agree with the 'powerful' in the room.

Meaning for the resident participants also came from the lessons learned, and their ability to share these lessons with others. As a huge factor, learning (a deeper mechanism in Figure 5.4) equipped the resident participants with the knowledge and skills to speak meaningfully when contributing to the discussion. Learning and gaining information about the project enabled the participants to engage better and to contribute more comfortably. They spoke about learning new terms and gathering more information (technical) about their natural resources. For instance, Bongile (participant 1) said*: "I didn't even know that joabase was wattle. I wasn't familiar with 'cultivate', 'uncultivated land', but I enjoyed listening to these phrases. I'm learning – I've learned a lot"* (Section 4.2.1).

According to Smith (2018), learning and gaining new knowledge and skills empowers people to act in different places. For instance, many residents made reference to gaining new skills either to work with diverse personalities or to speak in public settings. Learning occurred in all the resident participants' narratives and so was clearly relevant to their framing of participation. Palmer *et al*. (2022) found that building common vocabulary across languages (English and isiXhosa) among researchers and the other stakeholders in the TP was a vital step towards developing meaningful participatory governance owing to the confidence it built in the different stakeholders in using relevant vocabulary. Samarzija and Cerovac (2021) suggest that institutional epistemic justice demands that all groups enjoy equal and fair access to the opportunity to acquire the socially recognised markers of credibility. The sharing of vocabulary was set to equip all the players within the participatory space with the epistemic resources necessary to express their epistemic agency during the TP discussions.

The fact that the participants sometimes attended activities without much understanding of what the activities were about is an indication that they were curious and open to learning. The importance of curiosity for learning is extensively discussed in studies focusing on education (Stokoe, 2012; Arnone *et al*., 2011). According to these studies, curiosity is natural in human beings, and drives our life-long desire to explore our surroundings and answer questions that we ask ourselves. For these reasons, curiosity is assigned a high epistemic value (Schmitt and Lahroodi, 2008). Similarly, Webb (2010) posits that hope allows people to be educable because hope is about human beings' constant search for something better, and education provides some of the answers to the questions of the search. Some of the resident participants' goals in taking part in activities, including the TP, was to learn. In the TP specifically, many of the participants reported learning different skills and knowledge, meaning that that aspiration was attained. Therefore, hope and curiosity acted as guiding factors that drove the learning for this participant group.

Learning as an integral part of the resident participants' framing of participation, could be taken to highlight another factor that was also important to their framing: listening and speaking. It is through effective listening that knowledge and skills to speak meaningfully are gained (Palmer *et al*., 2022). So, participation was described as making a contribution to the discussion and taking part in decision-making processes. According to Mansbridge (1999) and Bichler et al. (2020), speaking is not just about sharing information, but also about shaping the agenda and influencing the discourse, which is critical in participatory governance. The idea of listening is mainly echoed through ideas around learning, while the constant reference to 'making a contribution' means speaking. The two were not necessarily placed side by side in this category; some participants placed emphasis on either listening or speaking as crucial for their participation. For instance, some emphasised that if a participant failed to make any verbal contributions in the space, then they had not participated. They gave examples of speaking, such as asking questions for clarification, not just sitting there without making a contribution or feeling discouraged when interrupted. It is through speaking that participants are able to express their ideas and engage actively in the decision-making process.

Others, however, highlighted the idea that one can participate without having to speak, by just being there, listening, gaining knowledge and understanding to stay updated. It is not surprising that some of the resident participants were content with just gaining information

out of a participatory activity, given their disadvantaged background of poor service delivery, including proper schools and networks. For a long time, the people in these rural and marginalised areas have struggled to access information, which makes any new information vital to their development, both personal and for their community. The importance of accessing new information and skills was also evident under the theme of learning, where most of the residents mentioned sharing new lessons and skills with others. Sharma *et al*. (2023) suggest that listening is also key in fostering connections between people, and enabling real community needs to be met. As already pointed out, human connection is central to providing participation with meaning for the residents.

Interestingly, the resident participants placed great emphasis on sharing the knowledge and skills learned from different spaces, almost as an obligation. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), when rural representatives share lessons from learning activities, this can be a mechanism for knowledge dissemination, inclusivity, and capacity building. Cornwall and Gaventa (2008) and McGee and Pettit (2020) submit that the transfer of insights back to the community strengthens the entire community's ability to address local issues. In other words, the residents in these marginalised areas have developed adaptation mechanisms to empower one another with the hope that these will bring betterment for their people. The idea of representative participation is implied here, and the need to be accountable to those whom one is representing. Karki and Adhikari (2023) show that shared learning experiences increase transparency, trust, and accountability within a community, and work to reinforce participatory governance.

It was also evident that sharing some of their skills gave participants status in their community, which had them elected to take part in more opportunities giving them recognition. Moreover, their status as helpful members in their communities encouraged them to take part in more activities, mainly towards community betterment. The idea of status also came up where participants referred to sleeping away from home as a way to be recognised as someone who works, and another example of status was that of feeling recognised as elderly women, encompassing age and gender. As Kay said: "*When I sleep in town it is nice for me; it shows that I am working, unlike being in the village"*. This quote also

shows how a working person is perceived in the area; that is, meaningful work requires one to leave the village once in a while, or even regularly.

Recognition gave meaning to the resident participants' participation and surfaced in different ways: recognition of their valuable contribution to the discussion, recognition of their status in social interactions, and that of visibility (or being seen). The sense of validation that usually came from others within the participatory space strengthened their commitment to contribute further (Agrawal, 2005). Schlosberg (2007) advises that recognising the contributions of local communities, especially those of indigenous and marginalized groups, reinforces the legitimacy of participatory processes and strengthens collective action. This recognition aligns with the need for inclusive governance structures that respect different stakeholders' roles and contributions. Fernández-Giménez and Wilmer (2024) have suggested that the way people identify with their place influences their decision-making, which is evident in how some of the residents kept referring to wanting to make a difference in their community by deciding to take part in certain activities.

Another way to confirm the crucial role of recognition in the resident participants' framing of participation is through participants feeling discouraged from raising their concerns when they assumed that these concerns would not be considered; that is, a lack of recognition for their contributions led to discouragement to make further contributions. As highlighted by Eissa (2024), failure to acknowledge and integrate diverse perspectives can lead to conflict and disengagement, particularly in multi-stakeholder settings. Indeed, disengagement came up when a young participant felt attacked instead of acknowledged for their contribution to the discussion in their village meeting. As Bongile exclaimed: "*I tried asking questions before but was attacked. I felt like, let me just go home, no one is listening to me; so just keep quiet, sit down*". What this translated to within the TP for this participant in particular was the confidence mentioned as a result of feeling seen when his opinion was sought.

The misrecognition that participants suffered, for example, when they were not listened to by their elders who would not take advice from younger people is, according to Fraser (2000) and Blue *et al*. (2019), disrespectful because the person is stereotyped, based on the group that they are associated with. The disrespect that came with making assumptions and generalisations was further expressed by Kay, who remarked, "*I do not like being treated like*

a child – where assumptions are made, or mistakes generalised – that is not respectful." Honneth (1995) submits that people's dignity is closely linked to the recognition that they receive from others, which implies that the recognition of others within the participatory space is not just about ensuring the inclusion of diverse voices, but is also about respect for others.

Recognition of their contribution gave some participants confidence. Recall Bongile's words: "*Sometimes I do have something to say, it makes me comfortable, I feel more confident because you can see me you can read me"*. Being seen can be viewed as a metaphor for visibility, an experience that is quite lacking for marginalised communities like the Tsitsa catchment residents. Being selected (recognised) among others (a form of recognition) further increased their confidence, especially in times of self-doubt. "*First, I doubted myself, I was not confident I could do the job; I even wanted to stop going to church. Being elected means there is something I can contribute. I was encouraged by other church members. It gave me confidence* –", said Nolu. The first quote in this paragraph is from a young man in his early 20s, whereas the second quote came from an elderly woman; both these participants fall into marginalised social groups in terms of age and gender, making them even more vulnerable to invisibility in the participatory space. Ensuring their voices, along with other diverse voices, are included is vital for participatory governance, especially in the CSES context. Argawal, (2005) suggests that when individuals and communities are recognised for their contributions, it strengthens their connection to the process.

A combination of human connection and recognition seems to be the enabling factor in building confidence in the resident participants since it is through interactions with each other that their respective capabilities are recognised.

Not surprisingly in a context like the TP, involving people from different walks of life, issues of power dynamics came up in relation to race, and language. The resident participants were intimidated that it was 'white' and 'educated' people who were making up the research teams in the TP, so intimidated that some did not attend interviews. Much power comes with being white in South Africa, given the apartheid history that gave most of the services and resources to them, leaving black South Africans marginalised and vulnerable.

Education is also an intimidating factor in this context due to poor access in the Tsitsa community. According to some participants, the problem with expressing themselves in English is not only due to their lack of formal education or practice, but the poor education system, which placed them at a disadvantage, no matter how far they had gone in pursuing formal education. In Themba's words: "*If you take a child from here, and place them in a town school, there is a big difference; you can blame our education, which was the worst one. Some of them studied in Mthatha college, then stayed in the village where they never got exposed to people who speak English; it affected their confidence to speak. That is the disadvantage we have"*. As explained in the context section of this thesis, the Tsitsa catchment falls under the former 'homelands' (former apartheid) which were quite far from basic services, excluding people who lived there from many public platforms and opportunities (Fry, 2023). Recall that the ability to express themselves was an important factor in their narratives of the meaning of participation, and so experiencing difficulty expressing themselves must have led to many levels of frustration when it was inhibited.

On the other hand, when participants managed to acquire the ability to express themselves in English, such as Themba (Participant 8, Section 4.2.1) who was taken to study in private schools, it is evident that he became content with himself and could speak (and so participate) in spaces where white people, and his seniors at work (also representing status and power dynamics) were present. This further proves the point that being able to speak in the participatory space is of great importance for these participants. Among resident participants, there is status associated with interacting with white people, as mentioned before, which came from the belief that white people are better owing to having access to more resources as a result of the apartheid legacy in South Africa (Tshishonga, 2019). The disadvantage of placing so much trust in others (here, white people) is feeling intimidated or that one's input is not good enough, thereby inhibiting meaningful participation.

The findings in this group show a gap between the intention to include local residents in all aspects of process planning on the part of the research team and the reality of what actually happened. The participants mentioned that the TP team came into the area with most of the plans already made, leaving little or no room for them to make contributions. Time of entry (Kosko, 2013) was one of the biggest influencing factors when it came to participants' comfort

to speak up in participatory spaces, where those who entered at later stages of the process felt uncomfortable until they settled into the space over time.

The layered critical realism approach enables me to see that some of the unease of the resident participants with speaking English (the 'actual') was rooted in the historical marginalisation of the group, which prevented them from accessing equal opportunities (the 'real'). Moreover, the reason for low attendance (empirical) at interviews was due to feeling intimidated, which is rooted in systematic power dynamics. Therefore, even though attendance at the interviews (the 'empirical') could be affected by factors, such as lack of childcare or other logistical issues, such as insufficient awareness about a meeting, the root cause (the 'real') lies in systematic issues that have denied them equal access to markers of credibility so that they do not feel confident about attending events involving 'white' and 'educated' people, as expressed by Nkosi (participant 2, Section 4.2.1).

The critical realist approach uncovers that underneath (real) the tokenistic role that the youth felt they were made to play in participatory spaces as mere scribes whose contribution was dismissed, was the intergenerational power imbalance that does not support elders taking advice from young people.

Issues of gender disparities also surfaced through the application of the critical realist approach, which allows me to make sense the women's satisfaction in contrast with the men's dissatisfaction with the low income received within the TP, since financial pressure in households in this context still lies more with men than with women.

5.2.2 Researchers

(The quotes used in this section were taken from Section 4.3.1)

The hope of what could be achieved through engaging with others formed a central part of the researcher participants' framing of participation. Their main hope was that their interactions with others would lead to positive outcomes, especially in the lives of the local residents of the Tsitsa River catchment. Being aware of how powerless some of their community partners were, due to exclusion from decision-making spaces, the researcher participants' hoped empower them to express their agency in spaces that could allow them

to be influential in making positive change in their communities. In a way, perhaps uncharitably, researcher participants could be said to have embodied a Messiah complex, which is a characteristic of a person who feels that they need to save other people (Corbett and Fikkert, 2014). This can potentially be read off a reference on the part of the researcher participants to "*hoping to help*".

A downside to this perception could be that the researchers unintentionally perpetuated power imbalances between themselves and the residents by holding the mentality that they were 'helping'. If this was the case, then they stood the risk of allowing the resident participants to remain in the receiving end of their exchanges instead of exercising their agency as was the intended outcome. Given this, researchers should exercise caution in the perception of their role in order to avoid perpetuating the very power imbalances that they hoped to alleviate by facilitating participatory activities. Allowing people from marginalised communities to view themselves as helpless does not support the emancipatory approach to participation, where everyone involved has a significant role to play or contribution to make to the process.

Applying critical realism here enables me to link the researchers' presence (the 'empirical') or willingness to participate (the 'actual'), to this deep-rooted Messiah complex (the 'real'), which despite coming from a good place, needs careful attention in terms of the role it plays in perpetuating power imbalances.

An interesting finding was that the researchers also mentioned that some of their hope could be seen simply as a leap of faith, highlighting the fact that they were aware of the uncertainties that were characteristic of the context they were embedded in, that is, a CSES. As Kathy said: "*Some of it is like hope, and we just keep doing it, hoping that maybe someday things will change".* This shows the awareness that even though researchers or most outsiders come into communities with preconceived ideas about what the initiative should achieve, they have limited control over what happens with and beyond their engagement with local communities. Being aware of the uncertainties and non-linearity of outcomes associated with CSESs could potentially help in managing people's expectations by keeping them open to different possibilities.

As evident from the model above (Figure 5.4), frustration always accompanied hope and it arose acutely in relation to the payment of participants who played the vital role of providing the raw information that drove the participatory process, but who were the only ones not paid for their time (the few residents who did get paid for working for the TP were an exception). As evident in the resident participants' findings, their motivation to get involved in the first place was money since they hoped for employment. The tension here exists, then, between not paying community members and so exploiting them, on the one hand, and paying them and potentially undermining the intrinsic motivation of the participants on the other. According to Sandy and Holland (2023), paying participants can signal respect for their time, and in terms of sustainability, Różyńska (2022) suggests that payment may also help maintain consistent involvement in contexts where participation requires substantial time and effort. However, Bovaird (2021) asserts that non-payment of participants may encourage a sense of ownership and personal commitment, thus potentially fostering long-term engagement due to intrinsic motivation overpowering the extrinsic incentive of money. Also, as a rule, some funders do not allow for participants to be paid, and practically, it might be challenging for open meetings where nobody has much idea of how many people might attend. This leaves the issue of payment of participants quite open to further exploration, especially given the reasonable arguments on both sides.

As with resident participants, human connection also gave meaning to the researcher participants in the sense of finding a place within the team. The researchers described participation as being part of a team and working towards a common goal. According to Hellgren (2025), viewing participation in terms of being part of a cohesive team encourages participants to support each other's contributions, creating an inclusive environment. The sense of collective responsibility and shared purpose of a team are critical for engagement in participatory governance. According to Stokols *et al*. (2008), a coherent and functional research team minimises conflict and redundancies, improves workflow and time management, and maximises project outcomes.

However, the tendency to hold back a little bit when first entering an already occupied space came up as an issue for some researchers. Holding back could be caused by late entry into the participatory space when the team had already established a bond, making it hard for new people to navigate the space (Kosko, 2013). According to Munarini, (2025), one of the

primary reasons for holding back at first is unfamiliarity with the group or the subject matter, which makes newcomers unsure about the norms of engagement. As Louisa remarked, "*Even when we take the back seat, we're given opportunities"*. Aya said, "*At my first Tsitsa Project meeting I remember thinking: I have no idea what these people are talking about I have no idea why I am in this meeting? I was just there, no participation, not that it wasn't allowed, it wasn't the right time or the platform"*. Interestingly, both these comments were made by researchers for whom English is not their first language. According to Lee (2025), some people may be particularly prone to holding back when they fear that they will not be appreciated or understood in an environment, particularly if they struggle with language or identification challenges. These researcher participants indicate that although the chance was given, they were simply uncomfortable, so timing seems more important in this situation than anything else.

Bauer et al., (2024) suggest that this hesitancy may also be exacerbated by concerns about judgement, or a fear of being incorrect, especially when a newcomer perceives others to be more knowledgeable or experienced than they are. The constant reference to feeling safe within the participatory space also prompted curiosity about what constitutes a safe space. According to the researcher participants, a safe space is one where they can speak and be listened to without being judged. For instance, Aya said, "Y*ou're so scared you're going to say something stupid, something that's not good enough: I'm just going to shut up so I'm safe, I don't want to look like an idiot. …and when not to participate: I don't like talking when you feel like you're going to be judged*" (Section 4.3.1), showing that judgement within the participatory space is inhibiting, even for some researcher participants. Given Aya's role as catchment coordinator, and at the time of experiences like this, she had just started working with mostly senior researchers, which might have added another layer of power. Even though transdisciplinary teams come highly recommended, there are inherent power imbalances in these teams that result from experience, or expertise that inevitably influences people's participation.

Critical realism enables me to link some of the researcher participants' responses (the 'actual') to underlying (the 'real') mechanisms, such as the feeling of intimidation felt by people with limited expertise and experience in the participatory space, which influence how comfortable they are to participating in certain spaces. Moreover, it reveals that often the self-doubt that

someone experiences as a result of being unsure about how things are done when one enters an already occupied space underlies people's initial holding back.

This barrier was overcome by taking time to learn how the participatory space worked, and deciding on the role they wanted to play, based on what was already available. Finding a place within an already occupied space requires negotiation on the part of the new person in terms of adapting their initial goals to fit in with the goals already agreed upon by those who entered the space first. As Kathy expressed it, "*They had worked together for years, quite set in the ways that they worked. I arrived with a different way of thinking. I don't want to say your system is wrong or right, but I want to understand how it works, and can we possibly work on tweaking some things?*" Even though the above quote was in relation to an experience prior to the TP, a similar experience was expressed by Tom concerning the TP, when he said, "*I've had to adapt my expectations to some extent, letting go of some of my idealism. Having done that I understand, which makes it easier to see value in the way things are done*". These quotes show participants struggling to find a place in the participatory space and how they both overcame that struggle by connecting with those who were already present in the space.

The support of others within the space also surfaced as enabling participation for the researcher participants. Even those who started off shy (such as Aya and Louisa) came out of their shells once they connected enough with their teams, who were rooting for their success. In Aya's words, *"That support structure, people rooting for you, it's easy to be your true self…to reach your potential or even build towards it".* Kathy also alluded to the support received from one's team in the participatory space when she said, *"People started feeling comfortable. It was really nice to know that we all had each other's backs."* Foote and Kim (2023) suggest that people are more likely to continue contributing when they feel part of a supportive group with shared values and objectives.

Trust was also a big factor in relation to human connection. The researchers explained how trusting members of their teams allowed them to let go of control because, over time, they had learned about and recognised the capabilities of their team members to achieving the team's goal. Anna (Participant 12) said: "*The team is better at uncovering diversity, allowing it to come out. It's been hard to let go of controlling. The hardest lesson of participation is being willing to step back and watch something unfold, respecting the process"* (Section 4.3.2). The results of feeling trusted were also evident from Aya's narrative when she

remarked: "*Suddenly being trusted with things, the only one who could answer. I had to sit up and listen; now I feel like Oh! I'm listened to"* (Section 4.3.2). Singh and Crouch (2021) suggest that trust can bridge power imbalances within diverse groups, can help to equalise participation, and ensure that all voices are heard. Could trust be what influences how power becomes distributed within the participatory space? The point here is that trust can be useful in enabling the distribution of power within the participatory governance space (Fry, 2023), which is one of the major challenges in invited participatory spaces, where inviting members can fail to relinquish power to invited participants, standing the risk of reinforcing an instrumental approach to participation.

Working remotely as a result of C0VID-19 undermined the connectedness that humans require to make participation effective. The world is becoming a village, and we are gradually moving towards working remotely, so this raises the question of how to get around this. Hepplewhite (2022) offers a model of recognition of the defining characteristics of participants so that a certain level of sensibility can be applied to support positive outcomes that incorporate all those who are involved. In other words, the recognition of each participant or team member enables human connection within the participatory space, thereby making participation meaningful. However, researcher participants expressed that participation was undermined by the distance created by working remotely so that informal networks were harder to form beyond the formalities of the participatory space.

Glucker *et al*. (2013) and Uittenbroek *et al*. (2019) suggest that substantive participation is driven by the potential for innovative interventions. The researchers placed even more emphasis on the careful inclusion of all voices, through facilitation methods that evened out participation by randomly eliciting contributions, ignoring hierarchies, writing the exact words of participants where everyone could see them – thus acknowledging individual value – and through the 'learning words' process (Palmer *et al*. 2022). O'Reilly and Murray (2024) argue that inclusivity is often achieved when marginalised voices are brought in as active partners in decision-making rather than as passive participants. They also speak about participation as reciprocal or as a two-way communication process among those who initiate and those who are invited. The role of the facilitator was important in creating an enabling space that balanced the different voices to be heard. According to Palmer *et al*. (2022), the facilitator has a role in balancing the voices of the participants by bringing in the silent voices. Moreover,

they claim that it takes time to carefully facilitate participatory governance in a way that is cognisant of the principles of epistemic justice.

Hewlett and Ramesh (2021) highlight that failure to acknowledge different voices can discourage participation, which can potentially weaken the collaborative action required for effective resource management. For instance, Aya commented, "*Sometimes others are overpowering in spaces where there's no space for other people to engage. When you say your ideas, they listen, but then they're just like, 'Okay, but…' then just move on to another. I feel like in those instances people are silently selecting who participates, and who doesn't, according to your importance and relevance*" (Section 4.3.1). Dotson (2011) warns against continuously dismissing some voices in the participatory space as this may lead to testimonial smothering, where people limit their contribution due to fear of rejection.

Even though recognition of roles came up as enabling participation, it was also mentioned that the labels attached to certain roles can come with a certain level of misrecognition of the individual behind the role. As Kathy said, "*It's so strange how roles, and the associated authority, change people's perception of who you are, and how you behave, even if you don't think you've changed. There's almost an expectation that in a particular role, you'll know or understand certain things: suddenly I might be the voice of authority*" (Section 4.3.1). Kathy also referred to superficial recognition, where people may be acknowledged, yet the acknowledgement is not genuine. In her (Kathy's) words: "*I've certainly been in meetings where you feel uncomfortable. The person running the meeting is trying to be kind but underlying that is this tension of 'there are foreign-speaking people in our midst'".* Kamruzzaman (2020) argues that, in theory, inclusive participation is important. However, tokenistic inclusion may be found in practice, which makes the advocacy for participation just lip service. According to Fricker (2007), a lack of recognition can have a psychological impact such as a lack of confidence, including epistemic confidence.

The researcher participants' framing of participation was further influenced by learning and adapting in that they referred to previous experiences that taught them different lessons. One might even say that learning and adapting were central to researcher participants' idea of participation *"… that drove the shift from translating from English to isiXhosa in workshops to the other way around. A huge learning experience"*. Much learning for the researchers came up in relation to constant reflection, which gave rise to new lessons and actions. "*After*

workshops we reflect. Sometimes people have voiced discomfort: I really value voices that are more critical. So, participation and engagement, and learning by doing, is how I live. Feedback has been the driver, the conscious feedback of how I experience the person I'm engaging with". Fischer (2021) posits that the reflective process improves the learning outcomes of participatory governance as it builds a shared commitment to continuous improvement and more informed decision-making.

More learning took place in relation to context, which drove the way participation was adapted to suit different contexts, further proving the point that contextual awareness is the foundation of the framing of participation.

The critical realist view enables me to see beyond the enthusiasm expressed by the researcher participants (the 'actual'), so that the underlying factors come to light, including the mechanisms that influenced participants' holding back at first.

5.2.3 Implementing agents

(The quotes used in this section were taken from Section 4.4.1)

Hope also motivated the implementers to participate. Like the researchers, the implementers hoped to empower the Tsitsa catchment residents so their basic needs could be identified and met. It could be said that their role as intermediaries between the community and the government gave them a sense of duty to want to make a difference. That is, hope for them was more attached to a sense of duty than to personal aspirations.

Their main frustration surfaced when their ideas were shut down when they first entered the TP space. Their sense of frustration came as a result of their inability to achieve the goals that they had entered the space with. As Jack said, "*Having your suggestions shut down is frustrating, because that is what you know. Now you are told that is not how things are done. You end up slacking in your tasks, and get blamed for it, which is unfair*". Taylor (2021) suggests that if participatory processes do not deliver on the hope they inspire, they can lead to frustration and disengagement. Instead of disengaging, the implementers hung on owing to their previous experiences, which allowed them to learn that participatory processes are usually harder at the beginning, but get better with time. In Phiwe's view, "*When we first entered the Tsitsa space, there were miscommunications. That didn't bother me much because I've been working in different big projects; when they start, there are always those*

misunderstandings". In this way, previous experiences of participants have a bearing on further engagements, and in this case, previous experiences helped to manage the implementing participants' expectations of the TP. Participation experiences can be said to act as feedback loops, where each encounter informs expectations about future processes, which underscores the importance of designing participatory mechanisms that yield positive outcomes to sustain long-term engagement (Fung, 2015;Rovolis and Habibipour, 2024).

Human connection also provided meaning for the implementer participants. They spoke about being part of a team, using metaphors such as 'piece in a puzzle', or 'part of a bigger narrative'. In Jack's words, "*There are a number of different moving parts to achieve a certain goal; that's what participation is"*. For them, participation was about bringing in different people who connect with each other over a common goal and similar interests. The idea of a team and the roles played within a team are emphasised here, which is important for the recognition of diverse voices as each role is valued. Recognising the different roles that are represented in a transdisciplinary team, such as the TP, is important for ensuring inclusivity, especially given the implementing agents' role of mediating between the various groups involved in participatory governance (Fung, 2022).

In addition to reducing conflicts, similar interests and goals also foster networking and relationships of trust that last beyond the participatory period. The phrase 'relationships of trust' raises the question of trust, which, according to Fry (2023), is important in fostering human connection and, therefore, participatory governance. These relationships were mentioned in connection with both professional and personal benefits, showing that even though some people, including implementing agents, come into participatory spaces in their professional capacities, personal influences may arise.

Once again, recognition came up as giving meaning to participation for the implementing agents, but more focus was placed on the inclusion of marginalised voices. Fung (2022) suggests that implementing agents play a vital role in participatory governance by ensuring that marginalised voices are not only heard, but are seriously considered in the decision-making process, especially in contexts with socio-economic or cultural divides. Though they acknowledge that it might be challenging to ensure the inclusivity of everyone, the implementers asserted that it is nevertheless important to attempt to do so. For instance, Jack said, "*Local dynamics present a challenge for participation; they need to be handled with*

care, especially when looking to highlight less powerful voices". This further shows the implementing agents' commitment to inclusivity, especially of marginalised voices, as they go on to make suggestions about how to ensure that everyone is satisfied with the outcome. In Jack's words: *"One of the biggest challenges in participation is making sure everyone is participating, everyone understands, everyone is heard. But everyone's views are important. If a decision has to be made, explain why this decision was better than the other one".* According to Sørensen and Torfing (2020), transparency and accountability can foster public trust in government when implementing agents consistently give feedback to communities about how their input is used to shape policy outcomes.

The implementing agents also highlighted the power struggle between those who entered the space early and those who came in at later stages. They spoke about how a lack of recognition of others when they first entered the participatory space was perceived to cause tension within the space for the newcomers. Folke *et al*. (2016) submit that owing to the adaptive approach required in the management of complex social-ecological systems, there is a likelihood that participants will be added over time, thereby making it critical to find strategies to make new participants feel better welcomed. With the inevitable chance of additional participants joining the process over time, Kosko (2013) highlights paying attention to the time of entry into the participatory space as it is crucial to people's ability to self-determine; late entry usually implies taking a while to become comfortable enough to speak freely, for instance. In other words, the time of entry has a bearing on people's ability to express their epistemic agency, one of the important factors required in the decision-making space.

For the implementers, COVID-19 brought about a positive change in that they finally found their role in being on the ground when the researchers could not travel to the study area due to restrictions placed on movement. In other words, the implementers found their place in the TP space as a result of the recognition of their role during the pandemic. Opportunities may present themselves at the most unexpected times, but it is important to identify opportunities and use them. Even though COVID-19 was a dark cloud, implementers managed to find a silver lining in it in that their presence began to be more recognised than before. In the TP CSES, this unexpected outcome emerged due to the external forces presented by the

pandemic, which is in line with the fact that CSESs are open and constantly interacting with their environment, and so may produce unpredictable responses to surrounding influences.

Recognition of context was also quite prominent for the implementers, particularly its role in guiding outsiders in terms of how to interact with the locals for engagement to be meaningful. Brosius and Russell (2003) argue that context sensitivity fosters inclusive decision-making and the effectiveness of participatory governance frameworks. The implementers also pointed to the consideration of power structures within communities in order to find ways to highlight the voices of the less powerful. As Jack remarked, "*The issue of power disparity within rural communities, where one's power over certain resources – money, agricultural resources, etc. – buys more opportunities to speak in these spaces"*. Tendayi et al. (2023) advise carefully considering community histories and power dynamics when implementing participatory governance initiatives because neglecting them can cause misunderstandings and impede inclusion.

In relation to context, implementing agents highlighted the importance of also recognising preferred community leadership, where communities may preferentially recognise either traditional or political leadership as the point of contact between outsiders and the community. For instance, Jack said, "*Context plays a huge part in the effectiveness of participation. Some people refuse, or are uncomfortable, working with traditional leadership; they prefer political leadership. There may be places where that political system works. It might not work in the rural contexts that we work in"*. This awareness was keenly important to their role as facilitators of the research/community interface, who need to foster trust-building between the different stakeholders. According to Van Eijk & Steen (2019), implementing agents foster public trust by being intermediaries between the government and the community, ensuring that the identified community needs are actionable. Buuren, van Meerkerk and Tortajada (2019) suggest that community leadership is one of the key conditions in the mobilisation of resources and development of organisational capacity, which are essential for co-creation in public platforms.

More emphasis seemed to be placed on highlighting marginalised voices for the implementers, part of the reason being their previous personal experiences of belonging to such groups. Jack (Section 4.4.2) referred to nerds (a socially marginalised group) being overlooked for leadership positions and how this led to their disinterest. Being homogenised

as a member of the group whose views are assumed to be similar to those of other members of the group also emerged as a form of silencing because the individuals reporting this experience did not feel that they were truly recognised for who they really were, or what they stood for. This kind of misrecognition can perpetuate epistemic injustice when it is due to marginalisation; the voices of those belonging to these groups end up being dismissed. Giladi (2018) argues that it is unfair to deny someone or a social group the epistemic respect they deserve because it denies them access to a progressive social environment where their self-confidence as logical inquirers is greatly enhanced by the respect they receive.

At this point, what is clear is that Jack, one of the two implementing agents, placed more focus on recognition, as is evident from the use of his quotes. His experience of misrecognition as a nerdy music student back in school seems to form an underlying need to ensure inclusivity, and his role as an implementing agent supports this deep-seated need. The critical realist approach allows us to link Jack's current stance about the participatory space (the 'actual') to his underlying childhood experience of feeling invisible(the 'real').

The meaning of participation for the implementers also came from learning. Diversity among participants fosters learning due to the exchange of skills and expertise. As Jack noted, "*Sharing knowledge and information, the opportunity to report, to get expert advice that I can trust, to learn from experienced people, is a huge advantage*". Given their description of participation as being about pieces of a puzzle, this quote adds that learning takes place as a result of the interaction among the people (or 'pieces'). This further shows the implementing agents' commitment to inclusivity by acknowledging that there are lessons to be learned from the different people involved, implying that attention needs to be given to all contributions for their value to the overall discussion. However, Jack's comment that "*expert advice that I can trust*" highlights the issue of who is considered an expert, and therefore trustworthy, and who is not. This raises issues of credibility and the markers used to determine whose testimony to trust and whose to ignore. If the goal is inclusivity, as is evident for the implementers, then care needs to be taken in using terms such as 'experts' since the assumption in the transdisciplinary spaces is that everyone brings in their expertise, whether experimental or experiential.

In line with their focus on inclusivity, the implementers highlight that having enough information enables participation since everyone contributes from a place of understanding.

As articulated by Phiwe, "*Without clear information, people will not participate. When they do not understand the aim of their participation, the process is labelled as belonging to someone else, as people won't feel like they own the space*" (Section 4.4.1). Interestingly, this idea of owning the space was inferred when the implementing agents remarked that it was harder for them to contribute when they first entered the TP space, but later found their place as a result of learning more about the TP and realising what role they had to play. Learning thus fosters inclusivity by equipping people with the knowledge and ideas to be confident epistemic agents. Epistemic justice, especially hermeneutic justice, is therefore enhanced through the process of co-learning (Palmer *et al*., 2022).

Regular interaction with the other participants also led to learning and trust. Learning came across in the form of learning what the real needs of the residents were so that adaptations could be made to accommodate those that fit the scope of the TP. For instance, Phiwe remarked, "*The regular interaction has led to learning about the interests of the communities"*. In terms of adapting, he (Phiwe) went on to say, "*In the Tsitsa catchment It seems people like agriculture. That's why we establish associations – so they listen"*. According to Lee and Schachter, (2019), implementing agents build relational trust by maintaining ongoing interactions with community members which reinforces a sense of partnership rather than hierarchy between government and citizens. Indeed, the TP's strategic placement of an implementing agent within the Tsitsa River catchment was perceived as enabling meaningful participation, especially given that the person spoke the local language of isiXhosa. Both the close proximity/access and the language factors enabled connection and comfort (trust) between the community members and the TP. Even though most research projects are conducted by teams that reside far from the study area, it is important to have some team members whom the community can easily to relate in order to bridge the language and distance gaps that usually exist between communities and outsiders.

Interestingly, of the two implementing agents, Phiwe seems to be the one who took part in this study focusing primarily on learning. Although it is not clear why learning might stand out for Phiwe, this dynamic shows that even though the categories of participants are grouped, there exist varying degrees of variability among the individuals within the categories. These variabilities need to be considered to avoid the risk of tokenism, where the categories are homogenised, thereby misrepresenting or misrecognising their interests.

5.2.4 Government

(The quotes used in this section were taken from Section 4.5.1)

Hope was also a motivating factor for participating for the government officials – hope to bring positive change, both as their duty and a personal aspiration. Government officials were eager to witness what the TP approach, one that has made transdisciplinarity the central approach, could potentially do differently. In Jemma's words, "*The Tsitsa Project had a different approach. It was much more integrated; that has had a softer spot in my heart. It's exciting and dynamic, trying to do something differently, recognising that the way we've been working, isn't working*" (Section 4.5.1).

However, their hope was met with frustration due to the gap between field officers who represent the government in the participatory processes and bureaucratic procedures that control things like funding. For instance, Jemma said, "*We could have made a difference, but just at a point where they developed these integrated nodal plans, we stopped funding the project… It's just this piece, left hanging, and I think we've probably deeply disappointed*" (Section 4.5.1). We did not progress along the participatory governance Capability Pathway as far as co-deciding (Palmer *et al.,* 2022). According to Watts (2006), no matter how much government officials who interact with communities may try, major decisions remain in the hands of officials with limited or no experience of the local context. Gaventa (2006) posits that even though field officials usually have greater proximity and understanding of community needs, their agency to act is constrained by the power dynamics embedded within the hierarchical structures, where decision-making powers remain in the hands of top management.

Closing the gap between field officers and senior management could potentially improve the way the government deals with community engagement. The gap not only frustrates the officials who have to face disappointed communities, but according to Mosse (2005), it can also undermine the credibility of participation efforts among communities, who may perceive the officials as tokenistic. Cook *et al*. (2013) assert that participatory catchment management organisations (such as the TP) usually have pure intentions to ensure local voices are heard,

but once these organisations partner with government, the statutory requirements end up leading them to deliver government agendas over the public 'good'.

As shown by the model of participation (Figure 5.4), government officials also found their meaning in participation from human connection, learning, recognition, and contextual awareness. Participation was described as a team effort, where the common goal being worked towards provides the basis for the need for connections with others. A sports metaphor was used to explain how the connection comes about. As Mandla said, "*On a rugby field or cricket field we're also participating, as spectators sharing views, "no, he's supposed to be doing it that way." I do not know these people, but at the end of the day we want something in common*" (Section 4.5.1). Central to their description of the term was collaboration and its potential to improve outcomes. Implicit in the quote above is the idea of ethnocentrism, where people who belong to a similar group tend to believe each other more easily, no matter how long they have known each other (Anderson, 2012; Keith, 2019). According to Anderson (2012), believing one's teammates more easily than others is not an injustice under normal circumstances because it builds trust within the team. However, if the person who is not believed belong to a marginalised group in society, then it may become an injustice against the speaker. In transdisciplinary teams such as the TP, it is therefore inevitable that people will tend to believe people who belong to either their team or discipline more easily. Fricker (2007) has, in turn, suggested that people develop epistemic virtues that will enable them to see past the identity of the speaker and focus on what is being said.

For the government officials, human connection was better fostered through recognition, especially of the diversity of roles in fostering harmonious collaboration towards a common goal, and to making the load easier. As Mandla remarked, "*I look at years back when Rhodes came in, how suddenly things changed; … It was hard in the initial stages. Change is not easy, but accepting it, and going with it, that is how participation is; it's to make the load easy*". Hepplewhite (2022) proposes recognition to discover what is valuable, productive, and enduring in these human connections during participatory interventions. Also, the quote shows the challenge involved in welcoming new people into an existing participatory space. Unlike those who struggled to find their place in other groups, the government officials experienced being the existing participants and finding it a challenge to welcome new people.

The question becomes: Is it the need to hold on to power that makes it challenging to immediately open up to new perspectives, and if so, what will it take to welcome these new perspectives easily?

Recognition of their contribution also formed part of their framing of participation. For instance, Mandla said, "*Where one lays their views and they are listened to, one needs to be able to say: I have a contribution in that thing. I want my name to be remembered positively not negatively"*. The point here is about listening and speaking, which, according to Fung (2006) creates a reciprocal dialogue when combined, thereby supporting the co-construction of solutions in participatory governance. Cornwall (2008) suggests that effective listening can lessen power disparities within the participatory space by ensuring that all voices are heard and recognised. Trust is also built through active listening, and connecting to the speaker. Feeling that their contribution is heard and valued fosters epistemic justice in that participants become confident in expressing their epistemic agency.

Recognition of context was again mentioned as enabling participation, especially for outsiders in a new space. As Jemma remarked, "*There are rules of the game; those rules change and differ from context to context"*. This is consistent with Cornwall's (2008) assertion that establishing platforms where a variety of viewpoints are truly heard and appreciated requires an awareness of "the politics of context". To further prove the importance of recognising context, government officials referred to instances where failure to make this recognition had nearly caused conflict between them and the people they worked with. For instance, Jemma said, "*Because I didn't understand, and wasn't aware of the rules that framed that situation, I got it wrong. I possibly insulted people, not intentional, but disrespectful"*. Failure to recognise context can mean that participatory initiatives run the risk of unintentionally reproducing systemic injustices. This holds true for the TP participants as Jemma expressed her experience of perpetuating systemic injustices when she said, "*In my ignorance I had not understood the dynamics around money. Being a young, white, English-speaking woman meant colonial overtones of controlling resources. I hadn't included; I hadn't allowed people to participate fully in owning the whole process*". Even though this was not a TP encounter, it is applicable because Jemma referred to issues of race, and the idea of white people holding on to resources, which is a practice that is deeply underlain by the historical colonial era.

Therefore, Jemma's experiences when she had failed to recognise her context teach us what the unintentional consequences may be, all of which seem to defeat the purpose of participatory governance.

Human connection also came up in relation to building relationships of trust among participants. By constantly disappointing the public, the government continues to risk breaking the ties between themselves and communities, who may decide to boycott the government's efforts to engage with them. Trust between government and the people being served, therefore, plays a crucial role in legitimising government's participatory efforts, and needs to be nurtured and maintained if participatory natural resource management is to become a reality.

Part of the problem, as evident from their narratives, is that the government has good policies in place to support meaningful public involvement, but their initiatives tend to remain on the tokenistic side of the participation continuum. Numerous reasons are given for this deficit, including a lack of skilled human resources to carry out the task, a system that still uses a reporting system that measures service delivery in the form of ticking boxes, and the language used that still maintains the status quo of top-down management instead of partnerships or learning. As Jemma commented, "*We don't have the skills; well, maybe some of us do, but there's no space. We need to be trying to learn a new way of working, but the systems … that's the bigger issue. People have been trained in particular ways, they've been quite rigid. Social process isn't valued, especially with the hard (natural) sciences, but it's also that our systems don't allow for risk-taking, experimentation, collaboration … What was sitting underneath was, they're not really interested in relationship or partnership or learning but in service delivery, in a series of measurable outcomes, in tick boxes*". Watts (2006) notes that the long history of an absence of institutional culture for involving the public in natural resource management is to blame for the distortion of participation. What would it take then to fill the gap between policy and practice to enhance participatory governance of natural resources? Newman and Clarke (2021) contend that even though the government may call for inclusive participation, challenges still persist that prevent the dismantling of institutional biases and structural inequalities that inhibit meaningful inclusion of the public.

Participation as people-centric means recognising people for who they are and listening to them. Government officials mentioned 'people-centric' as one of the principles of government when it came to participation, which means that the intention is there, but a gap seems to exist between the government's intentions and their translation into practice based on the evidence provided in the above paragraph. Gaventa and Barret (2012) emphasise that while frameworks for inclusive participation may exist, government initiatives often remain superficial due to a lack of accountability and failure to shift power to communities, thereby leading to a possible disconnect between intention and practice. If participatory governance is to become a reality, these power dynamics need to shift by empowering communities to be able to sustain such efforts when government initiatives end. As Mandla eloquently put it: "*There would be a time where you disappear. Be proactive. It's like a relay, when I run on my hundred metres, I need to give you this baton in a proper way so you can run your mile*" (Section 4.5.1).

Issues of positionality also came up under recognition, where some participants seemed to reflect on and recognise some characteristics about themselves that could add to the power dynamics. For example, Tom commented on the impact of his presence as a 'white' person, as opposed to the presence of Phiwe, his black colleague: "*If Phiwe goes to visit, it's maybe not a big deal, but it's like, I'm there, maybe Anna is there; you can create depth with specialness*". The concept of race is brought up in this quote, highlighting another useful factor to be recognised: one's positionality in relation to other people and how this influences their participatory experience. Jemma also remarked: "*Being a young, white, English-speaking woman meant colonial overtones of controlling resources…"* (Section 4.5.1). If the goal is to strive towards emancipatory forms of participation, demonstrating Ferreya's (2006) suggestion that privileged participants should reflect on their positionality often so as to determine the biases that may or may not prevent less privileged participants from enjoying their engagement with others.

Learning also gave meaning to participation for the government officials. Learning, fostered by the diversity of backgrounds, led to transformation as people went on to do things differently, seemingly as a result of their exposure to the TP. "*People are talking about the things they've gone on to do, that are different from what they were doing before:*

sustainability and behaviour change, taking an approach to other project spaces, carried from the Tsitsa project", Jemma explained.

Generally, government participants also had high hopes about the TP, some of which were evidently not realised when funding was abruptly cut off. But participants still found meaning in their participation from the connections formed, recognition felt, and lessons learned.

5.3 Emergent themes across groups

The findings of this study show many similarities and interesting differences in the meaning and framing of participation across the different participant categories represented in this study: residents, researchers, implementers, and government officials. Generally, the following themes cut across all participant categories: hope and frustration, human connection, recognition vs tokenism, and learning and adapting. Given that these groups come from such different contexts and engaged in such different ways **I suggest these themes may be generalised beyond this study and contribute to planning and implementing transformative participation.** I have organised them systemically in the model of participation (Figure 5.4). The main differences were how the different categories, or even individuals within the categories, related to these themes, even though there were still many commonalities.

5.3.1 Hope and Frustration

Tschakert and St. Clair (2013) suggest that hope is crucial in participatory processes as it fosters a positive outlook on the future and motivates stakeholders to engage meaningfully in resource management. What is evident across all the participant groups is that hopeful thinking is the motivating factor for many people to become involved in participatory activities. The participants in the TP hoped for a better future; while residents mainly hoped to influence positive changes in both their lives and their communities, researchers, implementers, and government officials hoped to bring positive changes in the lives of others, especially the lives of the communities they engaged with. Hope is, therefore, an important motivator for participatory processes.

Snyder and Lopez (2002) posit that people with high hopes are more likely to be interested in what other people have to say. Maybe this is part of the reason why participants in spaces

such as the TP, who are hopeful for what the initiative could bring, manage to listen to each other. Moreover, listening to each other seems to allow people to develop bonds with each other which give them meaning for taking part. Webb (2010) suggests that human beings' constant search for something better makes them educable since they become eager to learn or find answers to their never-ending questions, making hope a prerequisite for learning, another important theme in this study that gave meaning to participation for participants.

Hope was a necessary factor to effect change, and Jacka (2005) suggests that it takes a special kind of agency to keep that hope alive, even in the face of constraints and frustrations. Perhaps hope could be what keeps people engaging with participatory processes, even though some people experience disappointment owing to non-delivery on promises, or participation fatigue caused by many initiatives requiring involvement.

According to Dressler *et al*. (2019), while many NRM approaches are developed with the promise and hope for positive change, they often end with less-than-ideal outcomes when translated into practice. These less-than-ideal outcomes often lead to frustration for the participants involved, making frustration the result of the gap between hope and the attainment of goals. The TP participants often expressed frustration over non-attainment of their expectations, but the valuable lessons learned in the TP seemed to have either compensated for the non-attained goals or helped participants to adapt those goals to fit the TP scope. Some participants mentioned that they had expected the TP to be about filling gullies; however, it seems there was a failure to communicate that many gullies were stable, not growing, and very expensive to fill – and that drove the redistribution of funding towards other activities.

In relation to contextual awareness, Grace (1994) and Halpin (2003) assert that realistic hope is mindful of the circumstances surrounding one's ambitions, in order to keep it within reasonable bounds. Stated differently, although the study's participants aspired to a brighter future, their goals were constrained by the parameters of their current situation and the scope of the intervention. One of the ways in which expectations were managed within the TP was through regular efforts to inform participants of the limitations of the TP, which gave them a better understanding of what the TP could and could not do. For instance, Themba said, "*There were those workshops which taught us the systems it uses; I did not have a proper*

understanding at first but as I followed it, I realised that it does those things, but it depends on funding" (Section 4.2.1). This relates to the ideas around boundaries within the participatory space and the role they play in giving people freedom and, in this case, being free to exercise some imagination about the future, within the bounds of the given context. And so, as presented in the model (Figure 5.4), all the themes, including hope, depended on a level of contextual awareness.

Snyder and Lopez (2002) found that individuals with high hopes tend to be motivated to have numerous alternatives to achieve their aspirations, which helps them to keep the hope alive. The TP participants suggest that their hope for the TP outcomes kept them going, even though frustrations had mounted over things such as the realisation that the TP was only a research project, with limited focus on the actual restoration of the land, which led to limited jobs and low incomes. For instance, Nkosi said, "*We were excited after a long time without work – looking forward to being able to feed our families. I expected more. I was disappointed at how CLOs were treated – we were not seen as important as I thought. These challenges made me look at it differently, but I stayed because I liked it, it was in capable hands"* (Section 4.2.1). This participant (Nkosi), in particular, had high hopes for the TP solely based on the presence of white people, and so, even when things were not going as expected, his hope kept him going. The presence of hope was a huge motivation for participation in the TP, making it crucial for participatory initiatives to pay attention to factors that can keep hope alive to sustain participation.

As evident from the paragraph above, much hope was placed in the TP researchers to enable betterment within the TP. Even the researchers, implementers, and government officials clearly had hope that the element of research could lead to a better outcome that dealt directly with the real needs of the Tsitsa community. According to Quarles van Uffort *et al*. (2003), even though intentions may not change, things end up being caught up in lengthy bureaucratic processes, such as funding being cut, and contextual complexities, such as some of the gullies being stable or too expensive to repair.

Participants were motivated to participate in the TP by their hopes, which were rooted in the meaning they attached to participation. However, their hopes were usually met with frustration when their goals were not met.

In the context of CSES, resilience refers not only to ecological robustness but also to the social system's ability to adapt and transform in response to change (Folke et al., 2010). Hope acts as a positive feedback loop in CSES, reinforcing ongoing engagement, innovation, and experimentation, which are crucial for adaptive governance and learning (Bennett et al., 2016).

5.3.2 Human Connection

Christakis and Fowler (2009) suggest that when participants feel connected, they are more likely to create an inclusive environment where different perspectives are welcomed and valued. Human connection is framed around participants feeling safe and supported by others within the participatory space (Sections 4.2.2 and 4.3.2). As Kathy said, *"People started feeling comfortable. It was really nice to know that we all had each other's backs"*. Safety came up in the form of not feeling judged or attacked for their contribution. An example is when Aya said, "*… and when not to participate: I don't like talking when you feel like you're going to be judged. I get easily offended"* (Section 4.3.1). In addition, from the residents, "*People can be asked to raise their concerns, but because they are afraid, they keep quiet*. *But once the facilitators are gone, they have a lot of concerns to raise. If one person raises the concern no one supports them, people brush things off"* (4.2.1). Moral support from the people within the participatory space played a crucial role in giving participants the confidence to speak. In this way, human connection advances epistemic justice by enabling participants to feel confident expressing their epistemic agency.

According to Sandstrom and Dunn (2014), trust and mutual respect, which are nurtured through strong interpersonal relationships, are essential for effective teamwork. Being part of a team made up of members who become connected by the need to achieve a common purpose formed the TP participants' framing of participation. Within the team, trust, and finding one's place within a team played a role in enabling members to feel comfortable enough to freely contribute. According to Sandstrom and Dunn (2014), when individuals feel connected, they are more likely to share ideas, listen to others, and work together towards common goals. Christakis and Fowler (2009) also suggest that fostering strong social connections in participatory spaces can lead to more effective and cohesive group actions. By

enhancing people's ability to listen and for others to speak, human connection supports epistemic justice, which is required in the governance and management of natural resources.

The interactions within the TP were based on respect for each other, which stemmed from the recognition of each other's roles within the space. The participants mentioned feeling that they could contribute as equals without feeling intimidated. As Louisa said, "*But you don't need to be intimidated by the environment we're in; we're multicultural, multi-language, and all inputs are valid"* (Section 4.3.1). Louisa reminds us that, as depicted in Figure 5.3, the TP stakeholders formed a complex system through their diversity. Christakis and Fowler (2009) submit that strong human connections can foster inclusivity by ensuring that diverse voices are heard and respected. Recall that Themba (Participant 8, Section 4.2.1) also referred to being in spaces that would normally be intimidating to him, but the encouragement from his seniors reduced his feeling of intimidation. Therefore, once a group of unfamiliar people connects and becomes familiar, power imbalances decrease, making everyone feel comfortable enough to contribute.

The participants in the TP referred to instances where their participation was enhanced by their connection with the local people whom they worked with, especially in understanding the social dynamics within their context. Baker and Chapin (2018) suggest that context shapes participation in NRM by striking a balance between the benefits and pitfalls of participation. In the TP, for instance, to compensate for the lack of jobs, which might be a pitfall when the unemployment rate is high in the context of interest, the lessons learned and the skills such as facilitation were some of the benefits mentioned by the Tsitsa residents. Palmer *et al*. (2022) found that deploying the community liaison officers (CLOs) in extending the 'learning words' workshop equipped them with valuable lessons and skills that may be applied beyond the TP.

The TP participants also referred to the importance of understanding the rules in context, and how it gave them freedom to contribute, as long as it was within the bounds of the rules. The rules referred to here were not necessarily written rules, but the social norms that govern engagements in context which, as a new person in the space, become helpful to observe and catch some of the non-verbal signs that influence how the space is run. According to Fung (2015), rules not only set boundaries within the participatory governance context, but create

a sense of freedom for outsiders and marginalised voices, allowing those unfamiliar with the space to express their views without fear of overstepping. Boundaries are important for participation, and knowing one's boundaries enables one to connect better and exercise more freedom. It could be said that the participants' taking time to warm up to the TP space at first was a matter of learning the boundaries, so they were free to contribute when they were more familiar with those boundaries. Given this, a recognition of context became enabling for human connection to take place.

Human connection shapes how people experience participation, urging authorities to find ways to foster these connections to improve participatory practices. Samarzija and Cerovac (2021) suggest that one way to combat epistemic injustice at an institutional level is by ensuring that all groups have equal access to education and the opportunity to attain socially recognized markers of credibility. For example, a key highlight for the resident participants in this research was their involvement in the 'learning words' workshops (Palmer *et al*., 2022), where researchers, residents, and implementers developed a shared vocabulary to bridge the language gap between the groups. Some participants initially felt uncertain about the Tsitsa Project and their role within it, but through these workshops, they gained a better understanding of how the TP operated, which enhanced their experience of participating in its activities.

The 'Learning Words' process also created a kind of language bond since the workshops provided a platform to start from a common place using words as simple as 'home' (Palmer *et al*., 2022), which got residents, researchers and implementers describing to each other what that simple word meant to each of them, thereby creating a bond. Some of the residents mentioned that it was through their engagement in such workshops that they no longer felt intimidated to speak as they connected on a more personal level with the outsiders. Language as a source of human connection also surfaced in relation to the placement of an implementing agent who spoke the local language, which they felt eased communication. As Phiwe said, "*I think it helps to have someone based in the catchment, who speaks the local language. People are able to share, can comfortably share anything, they are comfortable to speak because they are speaking in a language which they are comfortable with*" (Section 4.4.1).

The participants managed to recognise each other through the discussions they held during the different TP engagements, which led to making connections that allowed them to remain respectful of each other's circumstances. For instance, the residents mentioned how they were treated with care and respect by the TP team. Hepplewhite (2022) suggests that recognition enhances human connection since when we are able to recognise each other's circumstances, we are better able to empathise and be sensitive to how we engage with them. Gaining empathy creates an emotional reaction to the injustice and oppression that certain people encounter in their daily lives and allows for an acknowledgement of these unique persons, making it possible to base a collaborative endeavour on a sensibility that promotes favourable results for everybody (Hepplewhite, 2022).

The struggle to find a place suggested that it was hard to speak without properly understanding what the participatory space was about. One of the major barriers was the confusion experienced by those who arrived later, or "in the middle of an ongoing conversation". This finding is in line with Kosko's (2013) ideas around the time of entry into the participatory space, and how that determines the ability for self-determination. The issue of newcomers struggling a little at the beginning could be a sign that more care needs to be taken to accommodate new people in participatory spaces. In the TP case, the participants pointed out that their reason for not participating was not the lack of opportunity, but it was just not the right time for them yet. The issue here seems to be about finding a place, where participants assert that they need time to settle into a space, learn and connect with the people in the space, find where their presence can have the most impact, and then occupy that role. Putman (2000) suggests that a sense of belonging can increase participation and commitment to the collective goals of the group (Putnam, 2000).

Human connection—expressed through trust, empathy, and collaboration—forms the social fabric necessary for social learning, knowledge co-production, and adaptive governance (Armitage et al., 2008; Berkes, 2009). In CSES, where relationships across scales and knowledge systems are essential, strong interpersonal ties facilitate the flow of information, alignment of values, and collective action (Folke et al., 2005). Such connection underpins bridging capital, a key resource in building institutional resilience (Biggs et al., 2015).

5.3.3 Recognition vs Tokenism

Closely related to human connection was the idea of recognition, which also formed a significant aspect in the TP participants' framing of participation; recognition in the form of being respectfully listened to, heard, and acknowledged for their contribution. The findings show that recognition of an individual's participation is meaningful to them. Recognition of diverse knowledge systems, values, and rights is also foundational to understanding CSES (Berkes, 2009). Schlosberg (2007) found that recognising the contributions of local communities, especially indigenous and marginalized groups, reinforces the legitimacy of participatory processes and strengthens collective action. This recognition aligns with the need for inclusive governance structures that respect different stakeholders' roles and contributions (Gaventa, 2006). In addition to highlighting the diverse voices of participants, the poems also revealed their identities, which (identities) according to Fernández-Giménez and Wilmer (2024) can be used to leverage what can and cannot be achieved within a participatory space based on the identities of the participants. In this way, recognising the identities of the participants through their poems could help in understanding what the participants are interested in, so that the participatory activity appeals to those interests.

Giladi (2018) posits that the genuine and respectful acknowledgement of diverse perspectives partially addresses the issue of epistemic injustice by validating people in their right as credible epistemic agents. What remains is the need to ensure the possibility of a sufficiently common understanding and vocabulary to speak and listen (Palmer *et al*., 2022). Blue *et al*. (2019) suggest that planners can apply the justice framework to improve participatory practice by employing appropriate procedures to ensure that all relevant stakeholders and perspectives are represented at the appropriate scale, and that all perspectives are recognised and valued.

People can be influenced to take part by external incentives, such as monetary rewards or recognition for their efforts (Cincera *et al*., 2019). Resident participants explicitly mentioned monetary rewards as empowering: Thandi, *"I started to make some money, and saw a difference in my life. I could now contribute towards my family's needs, and help my husband"*; Nolu: *"I prefer to speak my home language but after receiving my stipend and doing some work I decided to keep at it and see where it takes me"* (Section 4.2.1). In contrast to the empowerment felt by these two women (Weaver *et al*. 2023), another participant was

dissatisfied with the low income. Researchers brought monetary incentives up as creating tension. Recall Anna's remark that "*when we participate, the only people not being paid for their time, are the people who give us the data. It drives me crazy. It's fundamentally exploitative*"(Section 4.2.2). Again, the issue of payment of participants is a contentious one because, on the one hand, some authors (Ryan and Deci, 2020; Reese *et al*., 2023) state that non-payment encourages intrinsic motivation and a sense of ownership rather than a transactional exchange, thus potentially promoting long-term sustainability. On the other hand, however, Sandy and Halland (2023) suggest that payment of participants could represent a respectful gesture for the time invested by participants in the process.

The TP's respect for the Tsitsa catchment residents at both the individual and cultural levels became a form of recognition that the usually marginalised community appreciated, and which encouraged them to feel confident to contribute. For example, Nolu said, *"Attending the Tsitsa workshops, what I liked most is the respect we are given, even as elderly women. If you mention you're not feeling well, people check on you and take care of you. We were treated with respect and care"* (Section 4.2.1). Some examples of the TP's efforts to recognise the culture within the context was by having an elderly person give opening remarks for each engagement, preceded by a prayer since they were a majority Christian community.

Lack of recognition of the local social dynamics nearly got some of the participants into trouble, as one was viewed with suspicion while another left people feeling offended. As Young (2000) contends, a lack of recognition may turn into either an insult or a devaluing of an individual or their culture. Louisa said, "*I decided, well, let's have a small group with the young women? Oh my God, it created a big tension with the elder women because they thought there were some reasons behind; I was questioned, why are you separating these women? I explained that because I was just interested to hear from them and that was cleared, but initially as I said now it was suspicious because it was not done regularly"* (Louisa's original narrative, (Appendix 3.1.1)). Creating suspicion or offending local people through ignorance of the implicit dynamics that govern engagements could be regarded as a first step in alienating development initiatives from the local people who are meant to sustain them. Another example came from government officials (Section 4.5.1), "*Because I didn't understand, and wasn't aware of the rules that framed that situation, I got it wrong. I possibly*

insulted people, not intentional, but disrespectful. I didn't allow the process to unfold as it needed to", said Jemma.

Eissa (2024) emphasizes that neglecting to acknowledge and integrate diverse perspectives in multi-stakeholder settings can lead to conflicts and disengagement, thereby weakening the collective action essential for effective resource management. A direct link between a lack of respect and recognition, and a decline in a person's membership and participation has also been established by Schlosberg, (2004). The participants referred to experiencing a lack of recognition in participatory spaces other than the TP. For instance, Bongile referred to an experience from a community meeting when he exclaimed, "*I tried asking questions before, but was attacked. I felt like let me just go home no one is listening to me now, they don't even wait for you to finish talking they just counter-attack so just keep quiet sit down"*. And as a government participant, Jemma said: "*I just remember summoning up my courage, and being ridiculed for the idea I'd come up with. I can still remember the feeling now: I'm just going to be quiet, that was really uncomfortable so that helped keep me quiet"*. Given that these experiences of feeling silenced and dismissed came from young people (Bongile) and women (Jemma), both of whom belong to marginalised groups, further perpetuates the damage to these oppressed groups and could lead to testimonial quieting (Dotson, 2011). Medina (2012) points to the fact that the tendency to not trust certain types of knowledge can silence others through continuously experiencing no credibility.

Recognition was often mentioned alongside its opposite, tokenism, where tokenistic inclusion was experienced in some instances when people were invited to participate but their input was not necessarily sought. Examples of tokenistic behaviour were only mentioned in relation to experiences other than the TP. For instance, Jemma said, "*We convened a workshop, a big learning platform, the death-by-PowerPoint-approach … We sat and listened to somebody take us through a few steps, no time to reflect on what was being presented. There weren't many opportunities to question, but they managed to tick their box – that's absolutely not participation"* (Section 4.2.4). Kamruzzaman (2020) maintains that, in theory, giving voice to the poor is important, but tokenistic inclusion is characteristic of seeking 'cost-effectiveness', which leaves the poor unempowered. It is also an example proving how invited spaces have the potential to be instrumental if not well executed (Wals *et al*., 2008).

In addition, Mansuri and Rao (2013) highlight that even though participatory processes are highly advocated for, their practice still reflects invited spaces, which are usually meant to achieve institutional interests rather than genuinely address or recognise the voices of marginalised communities. Though not that prominent among the participants in the TP, a resident did mention discomfort brought about by the TP team coming into their area with most of the engagement decisions already made, leaving little room for others to comment. In his words, "*It is not easy. People are afraid. TP (researchers) and LIMA take a lead role doing everything on their own… If there was prior interaction with people from the project it would make it easy to influence decisions"* (4.2.1). Coming into the area with most of the decisions already made could represent a case of lack of trust at the beginning, which was later rectified when the CLOs became responsible for leading and conducting 'learning words' workshops across the Tsitsa catchment, and they successfully did the task. This shows that once the TP team had recognised the capabilities of the CLOs, they began to trust them with more tasks. In other words, building trust through connecting with each other and recognising each other's capabilities helped to begin the process of redistributing power, which empowered the CLOs (community members). The idea of empowerment arising out of feeling trusted also came up for some researchers, where Aya (Section 4.2.3) mentioned how being trusted with certain responsibilities encouraged her to be attentive because she could be questioned about her responsibilities at any time. Feeling trusted in one's role inspired in participants the need to be accountable for and alert in the participatory process.

According to Sarzija and Cerovac (2021), fair access to public position can aid vulnerable groups in attaining rewarding careers, which will also publicly affirm their epistemic resources, thereby breaking the cycle of epistemic disadvantage. The findings of this study reveal the need to recognise even those who belong to the most vulnerable groups for leadership positions in order to encourage them to want to aim higher. Weaver *et al*. (2023) provide an example by following the story of Ntombi, a citizen technician in the TP who transformed from a regular villager to a skilled and confident person who could speak at diverse scale platforms, including an international conference. Having the confidence to express themselves on diverse platforms strengthens the participatory governance process by having more participants willing and not feeling forced to express their epistemic agency,

thereby improving the process outcomes. Confidence to speak also means a move towards more emancipatory approaches to participation being advocated for in this study.

By being intentional about who to include and acknowledging each voice within the participatory space, a participatory space can address epistemicide – the act of oppressing particular ways of knowing (Kidd *et al*., 2017; Patin *et al*., 2021; Santos, 2016). The participants felt that their inputs were listened to and recognised as valid. Recall Bongile's remarks, "*In the Tsitsa Project they listen, they listen to me all the time"*. Louisa also said, "*But generally*, *I get the sense that people feel free to participate now, to speak when they want to speak… one doesn't need to be feeling intimidated that what they want to say is not a professionally constructed sentence; any inputs are valid"* (Appendix 3..11: Phase 3, poem title '*everyone is different*'). As Gaventa (2004) highlights, recognition can challenge systemic power structures, helping traditionally marginalised voices to be heard and valued, which is essential for a genuinely inclusive participatory environment.

Climbing the social ladder through their participatory efforts also seems to have encouraged enthusiasm among the participants to want to do more for their communities. The women and the young men, together with the elderly men who participated in this study, gained recognition and certain status in their communities for their participation in the TP. This is consistent with Weaver *et al*. (2023), who found that, with the confidence gained through capacity development programmes and a clearer understanding of their roles, people who participated in one activity tended to be invited to take part in more.

Recognition, particularly of diverse knowledge systems, lived experience, and identity, is foundational to epistemic justice—a concept that aligns closely with participatory governance in CSES (Fricker, 2007; Fabinyi et al., 2014). In the Tsitsa context, the emphasis on recognising local knowledge helped surface and legitimise local perspectives, giving voice to those historically marginalised in conservation discourse. This reinforces the legitimacy of governance structures and fosters inclusion, which are essential for long-term resilience and equity (Schlosberg, 2007; Ostrom, 2010).

5.3.4 Learning and Adapting

The model (Figure 5.4) highlights learning as giving meaning to participation. Learning equipped the participants with the knowledge and skills necessary to exercise their epistemic

agency in the participatory space. Lotz-Sisitka *et al*. (2015) suggest that learning empowers citizens to engage meaningfully in decision-making processes. Learning came up from the implementing agents when they emphasised that people needed to be given enough information about a process if they were expected to participate meaningfully because, without this information, they tend to be passive participants who are afraid to challenge authoritative voices within the space. Indeed, when the participants had learned what the purpose of the TP was, and what its limitations were through the 'learning words' workshops (Palmer *et al*., 2022), many of the residents mentioned that they were better able to participate and even explain it to their communities. In this way, the TP ended up with participants who were better able to speak the relevant vocabulary and advocate on behalf of the project to the rest of the community. Learning all the information also meant that conflict was reduced as some participants adjusted their initial hopes and expectations about the TP.

Diversity fosters learning by bringing together various perspectives, experiences, and expertise. The participants in the TP brought up learning from the different people who were involved. For instance, Bongile said, "*I'm learning – I've learned a lot – learning and gaining experience from the residents and the Tsitsa team. I think I'm enjoying it*" (Section 4.2.1). Aya also said, "*We underestimate the power of shared spaces, learning from each other…*". Another example came from the implementers, in Jack's words: "*Sharing knowledge and information, the opportunity to report, to get expert advice that I can trust, to learn from experienced people, is a huge advantage. Opportunities are shared"* (Section 4.2.3). In this way, bringing diverse voices into the participatory space meant that people got to share their knowledge and experiences, which gave the participants an opportunity to question some of their assumptions and come to better informed decisions.

The diversity present in the TP also contributed to transformative learning. Through their ongoing interactions with others, participants were able to consider their preconceptions and biases in addition to gaining new knowledge. For instance, Nolu explained, "*I gained knowledge. I have grown. I never used to notice the river, but now I am interested in what happens in the river. There is a lot I have gained like talking and working well with people*" (Section 4.2.1). According to Fischer (2021), the reflective process encourages a shared commitment to ongoing development and well-informed decision-making, which improves

the learning outcomes of participatory governance. These shifts in participants' thinking and sometimes acting is in line with the emancipatory approaches to participation that explicitly embrace the transformative and social justice agenda (Ferreya, 2006). The transformed thinking also aligns with the normative rationale for participation that aims to bring people to consensus by transforming some of their perspectives through their interactions with and exposure to different perspectives brought by other stakeholders in the space (Musch and Streit, 2020; Wals *et al*., 2008; White, 1996).

Diversity also encouraged adaptive learning. (2021) suggests that people who embrace diverse contributions tend to develop greater flexibility in their approaches, learning from a variety of experiences and refining their strategies in response to feedback from multiple sources. For instance, Kathy said, "*It's about accepting that it won't necessarily go the way you wanted it to go, and that's okay*" (Section 4.3.1). Anna also said, "*The hardest lesson of participation is being willing to step back and watch something unfold, respecting the process. I don't even know if I do it very well*. In addition, remember Jenna's remark, "*I possibly insulted people, not intentional, but disrespectful. I didn't allow the process to unfold as it needed to"* (Section 4.2.2). Using phrases such as 'watch the process unfold' indicates that participation requires openness to change. The TP's approach to participation was intentional, by engaging in reflection sessions that, in turn, led to changes. Recall that under the discussion of hope, it was stated that people with high levels of hope are highly motivated to develop alternative routes to reach their goals. Webb (2010) submits that hope enables learning in that education usually provides the answers to people's continuous search for answers. Such is the case in the TP, since the participants willingly and knowingly took part in an iterative process of experimenting and adaptive co-management.

Kidd and Hayden (2015) assert that curiosity is vital in learning processes as it drives individuals to seek information, ask questions, and engage deeply with content. Participants in the TP mentioned that they entered the TP from a place of ignorance, that is, without adequate information about it (TP), but their curiosity kept them going. For instance, Bongile said, "*I'm curious, like, I don't want to miss out; I want to be current and updated… know what is happening in my community"*. Kay also said, "*I was delegated to represent my community – I had no clue what it was about it was not what I had thought – but I was hopeful. I asked myself – "how does this concern my community?*" (Section 4.21). In some

way, curiosity seems to play a similar role in enabling learning since hopeful and curious people are inclined to be open to both listening and learning.

Learning was also mentioned in relation to context, where participants had to take time to learn about their context, and then recognise specific things about it to connect with the people. In this way, of all the themes according to the model (Figure 5.4), contextual awareness was the foundation upon which all the other themes gave meaning to participation.

Recognition, particularly in the form of epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007), is fundamental to equitable governance in complex systems. Recognition builds the legitimacy of institutions and strengthens system resilience by broadening the base of knowledge and values informing decision-making (Schlosberg, 2007; Fabinyi et al., 2014).

In conclusion, these themes underscore the complexity of participatory governance and the interplay between emotions, cognition, and relationships. Researchers must explore how these dynamics influence participation outcomes, paying attention to contextual factors that shape experiences of hope, frustration, learning, recognition, and human connection.

5.4 A critical view of the Tsitsa Project participatory model

The model is based on findings from a particular context, which potentially limits its general applicability. However, because it holds across different groups of participants, I suggest that the model provides a starting point for, and insights into participatory engagements, which can then be adapted accordingly to suit particular circumstances. Highlighting contextual awareness as vital, the model encourages anyone who wishes to apply it to be cognisant of how the different themes suggested in the model can be applied in their circumstances. Brown (2008) submits that the particularity of the information yielded by placing focus on a given case also allows for better customisation of the lessons learned and recommendations from the research, which could work towards implementing relevant interventions in and beyond the particular case.

Furthermore, the model was developed using individual experiences and their interactions at a local scale of governance, meaning that it might not accurately inform higher levels such as

national and global levels of participatory governance. However, higher levels stand to gain insight from the model since, even there, the participatory space consists of individuals who might have similar underlying factors influencing their participation.

5.5 Concluding

5.5.1 Reflection on positionality

The idea of positionality has been highlighted as an important factor to reflect on as it may influence how the findings of a study are interpreted (Ferreya, 2006).

I came into the research as a young student, who has, in many cases, had a hard time questioning authority, which has led in some cases to saying 'yes' to things that I did not necessarily agree with. Having experienced this intimidation and a sense that some people tend to ignore others in spaces that have been designed to be deliberative, the research question about how some people have experienced such spaces became very important to me as a way to raise awareness about the dismissive behaviours of others that leaves some people feeling rejected. My subjective position is that, at some level, there are relationships of power among the people who come into deliberative spaces, and I view it from the position of a young woman researcher.

I hail from Lesotho, a majority monocultural nation, with limited experience of diversity in terms of race and culture. I suspect that this clouds my judgement of what is normal because my 'normal' was certainly different from the 'normal' of black South Africans who have experienced apartheid and those who are still suffering owing to that history. I certainly have a limited idea of what 'normal' means for a white South African, either male or female. I only know these people from the stories I have watched on television because, as many people may be aware, my country, Lesotho, is an independent country that is completely landlocked by South Africa, which means we depend on South Africa for a variety of things. I had interacted with most of the participants in this study through various Tsitsa Project activities. These engagements allowed me to begin recognising both our commonalities and our differences. As I listened to their stories, further layers of their identities and experiences emerged. I came to understand more about who they were, what they valued, and some of their fears, expectations, and motivations. That, in turn, influenced my perception of each participant, based on their personal experiences, and how their stories touched my life.

Positionality

As a researcher, I occupied an outsider position within the context, which shaped my interactions with participants. My relationships with them—and with each member of the Tsitsa Project team—were distinct and evolved dynamically over time, reflecting both personal and professional dimensions. Even though I could relate with most of the participants at some level, they were all aware that at some point I would dissociate a little to write my thesis. So, whenever I introduced myself, I said I was Mateboho Ralekhetla, currently pursuing a PhD at Rhodes University, IWR..., but I originate from Lesotho. During my engagements, I was conflicted between identifying as an academic and a black student from a developing country, who faced similar challenges in their country. I was also still not confident in my abilities as a good or strong member of the organising or facilitating team, and not sure whether I was able to remain as neutral as academia may demand. Especially being registered in the natural sciences, it was hard to balance my observations objectively since the social context was too close to my heart, and made the work more subjective than I may have planned it to be. It was also hard to work in a team setting owing to some differences in how we practise community engagement. In this way, I felt more empathy with the issues and challenges of the partnership between community members and outsiders, and was eager to explore ways to make future engagements better by democratising the production of knowledge generated in the academic community from which I sometimes feel/felt like an outsider.

Nationality, which I believe most affected my positionality, fuels my feelings of isolation in academia – trying to master the academic language. Being an international student also meant that apart from my academic readings, I lacked a very large part of the history that influenced many of the locals. Even though I am black, and from a country within SA where I did my research, our circumstances differed greatly because of different historical influences. Owing to that gap, I may have judged some situations unfairly or too leniently. I was also introduced to the fact that many topics had some racial divide issue attached, which made my confidence in contributing to certain topics very low. But the close proximity of my country to the area also meant that I could relate to many of the locals, especially those who spoke Sesotho, and actually had their roots in Lesotho, and I usually gravitated to conversing more with them. My inability to speak the local language also limited me from speaking more

deeply with people who did not understand English. It also seemed to make them uncomfortable after some time, and they would find other people who spoke their language. It was indeed a strange space for me to work in since I could not relate much with the white people whom I came into the space with at a deeper level, and even with the black people whom I tried to, it sometimes became impossible for them to stay with me as our role was to mingle with the residents.

Another issue might have been my lack of experience with narrative interviews, where I had to let the conversation direct me to my next question with each participant. As someone whose background is natural science, this presented many surprises for me, and still left me feeling a little unsure.

Having a very limited understanding of the language, and relying solely on a translator might have possibly lost some information or even added the translator's biases on certain matters. Therefore, my lack of language proficiency and the presence of a third party during the narrative interviews might have affected the stories that were told. Another limitation might have come with the distance of collecting some of the narratives remotely, especially with the limited network in the Tsitsa River catchment (Appendix 5.1). The fact that my conversations with the participants kept cutting out due to connectivity loss might have meant that some of them decided to be brief so that they could be done with telling their story in case of the next network cut. I also could not reach some participants for their feedback as this came when the project had nearly been completed, and some participants had moved on to other things. Some participants could not even attend the feedback meeting that took place in the Tsitsa River catchment, making it difficult to get as much feedback from them as I did with those had attended. Thus, time constraints and things such as bad network have influenced this study, and most possibly the outcomes of this study.

Generally, I had a reasonable relationship with the majority of the participants in this study, and have been able to follow up with some of them beyond the conclusion. This means that some of the things that could not be cleared during the course of the TP have been finalised.

5.5.2 Conclusions

The thesis argues for a reimagining of participation that centres on recognising and legitimising diverse epistemologies. By fostering equitable knowledge-sharing platforms, participatory processes can contribute to more just and sustainable outcomes. This work

advances the understanding of participation as a vehicle for epistemic justice and sustainable natural resource management. The intention was to expand on the existing research on participation, especially as it relates to practice. Rather than assuming what its meaning was to the participants or what their experiences were, it explored participant narratives of participation to uncover the meaning and framing of participation. Through participant experiences, power dynamics that influenced their participation, especially power dynamics that can potentially either inhibit or enable respect and fairness in the inclusion of diverse voices, were explored. The exploration ended up with insights into what it takes to conduct meaningful participation in the form of a practical guide for meaningful participation.

The findings show that hope is the main motivation for people to become involved in participatory processes, hope for positive changes and betterment. However, frustrations tend to arise due to the failure to realise some of the aspirations that people have upon entering the participatory space. Frustrations arise as a result of the gap between hope and the attainment of participants' goals, or lack thereof. The foundation for the hope experienced by participants is the meaning they attach to their participation, and meaning in this study came from the connections formed with others within the participatory space, the lessons and skills learned over time, and the recognition of individuals for their efforts. All these factors took place with an awareness of the context in which such participation took place. The connections formed, skills and knowledge gained, and the recognition of the diverse voices required in the management of complex social-ecological systems all lead to epistemic justice, which is essential for the effective implementation of participatory governance (Palmer *et al*., 2022). The Tsitsa Project provided a useful case study to learn more about participatory natural resource management since it was made up of diverse stakeholders and intentionally set out to employ a transdisciplinary approach and adaptive co-management to learn about and adapt the engagement process as necessary.

Poetic inquiry enabled me to highlight participants' voices in a unique way, so that even the most marginalised voices got a chance to be heard through the found poems. The poems brought to light some of the emotions that participants experienced throughout their participatory experiences, important emotions that influence the 'social' that is embedded within the complex social-ecological system (CSES). Given the similarities and some of the differences, especially in terms of how the similar themes came up under the different

stakeholder categories, the unpredictability of CSESs became evident, hence the need for new and participatory forms of governance that engage multiple stakeholders to bring out the diversity that exists within these systems.

Employing critical realism allowed me to get to the deep underlying factors that tend to influence participants, such as unequal knowledge access and resource allocation, deeply ingrained power hierarchies, and many others (Cockburn, 2022). Moreover, the laminated approach of critical realism helped to explain the empirical through the actual and real factors.

In conclusion, this study contributes the insight that even though the participatory process may not always meet the hopes and expectations of all who are involved, meaning is found when human connections are nurtured, new lessons and skills are learned, and individuals are recognised and acknowledged for their contribution to the process, with the consideration of the context in which the process takes place. Together, hope, human connection, and recognition form a social-psychological infrastructure within the broader CSES. They support feedback sensitivity, learning, and collective action—all of which are key features of resilient, adaptive systems (Folke et al., 2005). These elements can be seen as part of the system's "soft infrastructure" that complements more tangible ecological and institutional components. By foregrounding these findings, the Tsitsa Project highlights the importance of affective and relational dimensions in navigating complexity and advancing just and sustainable outcomes in social-ecological systems.

5.3.3 Recommendations

At the core of all planning, once contextual relevance has been taken into account, there must be deep attention to timing and inclusivity.

Timing

Have a realistic and honest timeframe to ensure the common themes of hope, human connection, learning, recognition, and context awareness.

> **You have to take much longer**
>
> [1] It's not a rubber stamping or rushed process.
> If you really want people
> to truly participate,

allow that process the time that it takes.

[2] It's not a foregone conclusion:
there's something dynamic in that play,
that it's not fixed.
You have to take much longer,
give more time and resources;
it needs to be held.

Inclusivity

Given that this study's main contribution has been the amplification of participant voices through poetry, many of the recommendations relate to further ways to enable inclusion within the participatory governance space.

Facilitators of participatory governance are tasked with ensuring the inclusion of diverse voices, especially historically marginalised voices. Treating everyone with respect forms part of the facilitator's role and balancing the power dynamics that might be at play.

Tom enables us
to influence decisions the most.
He is patient
and respectful
and gentle—
helps people relax and feel able to contribute.
Even if they think what they have to say
does not matter
he encourages people
to participate.

The organising team needs to have prior interaction and communication with community members as this provides more opportunity for the community members to influence decisions about how engagements should be conducted instead of the project team coming into the community with everything planned.

If there was prior interaction
with people from the project
it would make it easy to influence decisions.

Inclusivity can also be ensured by providing enough information to participants, including what the scope of an initiative is, and what the people involved are expected to do. Information provision also levels some power disparities relating to access to resources, so

that everyone speaks from an informed position. The learning words workshops (Palmer *et al*., 2022) were a huge hit in the TP for levelling up the vocabulary gap among the diverse TP participants, so that a common language was developed to enable ease of knowledge exchanges within the TP, towards social-ecological justice. The information provided also empowered the community members to be in a position to explain the project to other community members, and for them to realise where they fit in; that is, they found their place. Therefore, the provision of information should be a priority from the planning stages of a project.

Listening and speaking should also be encouraged within the participatory space as it is through speaking that people introduce themselves, and through listening that we can recognise what role the speaker can play within a given participatory activity. All voices, especially marginalised voices, must be supported and constantly encouraged within the participatory governance space. To achieve social-ecological justice, no voices should be dismissed or ignored as, together, these voices provide a clear picture of the CSES of interest.

Therefore, more attention needs to be paid to what is being said rather than who is saying it as the 'what' is more important than the 'who' in a transdisciplinary space. Paying attention to what is being said is one of the ways that epistemic virtue (Fricker, 2007) may be developed in the participatory space, so that the speaker's testimony is given a fair chance. This point is not meant to contract ideas around recognising the individuals involved and treating them with respect, but is supportive of it since once the speaker's ideas are perceived as credible, the individual behind the ideas will be recognised.

People's expectations about a participatory process should be sought from the beginning and managed to prevent frustrations for participants. This aligns with Rogers and Luton's (2011) idea to first state each person's concern so everyone starts the process with less baggage on their mind. The Governance community of practice within the TP, upon realising what some of the misconceptions and misinformation were about the TP, began to regularly describe the TP scope and limitations, which enabled participants who were initially ignorant to participate better.

Efforts should be made to encourage newcomers to speak to avoid people having difficulty finding a place for too long. This can be a challenge, however, because people hold back for

different reasons, which might not be immediately recognisable to older members of the participatory space.

In all, participatory activities aimed toward social-ecological justice must manage participants' hopes to avoid frustrations, enable human connection, learning and the recognition of individuals and context. While the significance of these factors may differ from context to context, they are important factors to pay attention to for sustaining and strengthening participatory governance for social-ecological justice.

5.5.4 Key limitations of this study

One of the limitations of this study is that it was conducted within the single context of the TP, which might make it difficult to generalise the findings in other contexts. However, the commonalities that emerged across the diverse participant groups, with diverse professional and cultural backgrounds within the categories could make the findings of this study applicable in other contexts with diverse participants.

There is also a lack of detail regarding the variability of individuals in the discussion of the findings, thereby making statements about each participant category quite generalised. There was also not sufficient demographic information about the participants, which was a missed opportunity from the beginning. Having these details would help inform us about people's preferences according to credibility markers such as age, gender, profession, culture, and many others, which would improve the inclusion of these diverse people in participatory governance activities. Even though these details could not be recorded due to time constraints and the scope of the study, there is still an opportunity to get this information for publishing purposes.

Covid limited the depth of connectivity I had with participants in telling their stories – and yet, in feeding back there as a recognition of depths plumbed.

A detailed guide to participation could come from the work but has not been tackled in the thesis.

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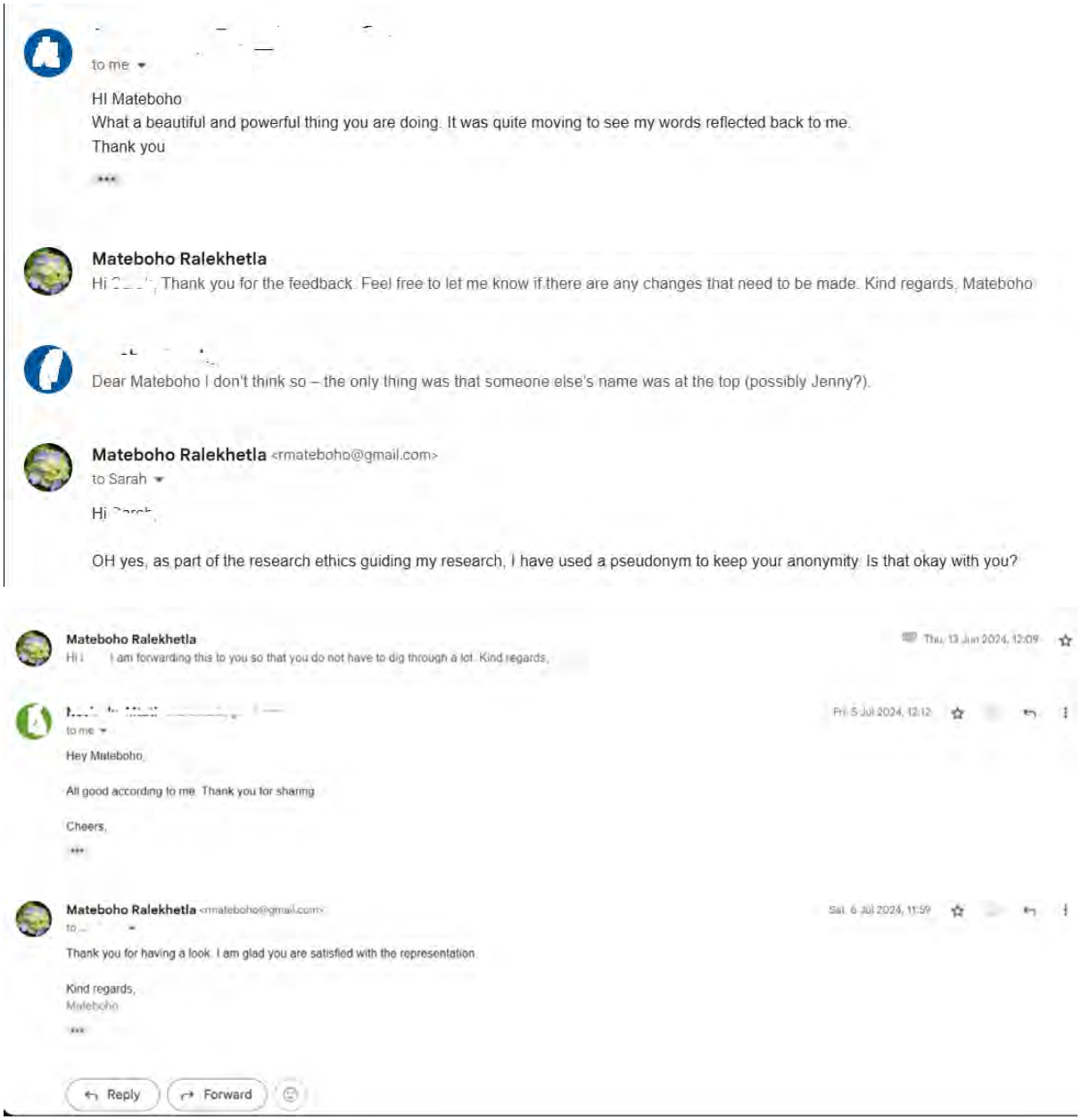
APPENDICES

Note: The appendices have been labelled according to the chapters in which they appear within the thesis.

Appendix O



to me

HI Mateboho
What a beautiful and powerful thing you are doing. It was quite moving to see my words reflected back to me.
Thank you

Mateboho Ralekhetla
Hi , Thank you for the feedback. Feel free to let me know if there are any changes that need to be made. Kind regards, Mateboho

Dear Mateboho I don't think so – the only thing was that someone else's name was at the top (possibly Jenny?).

Mateboho Ralekhetla <rmateboho@gmail.com>
to Sarah

Hi ,

OH yes, as part of the research ethics guiding my research, I have used a pseudonym to keep your anonymity. Is that okay with you?

Mateboho Ralekhetla Thu, 13 Jun 2024, 12:09
Hi I I am forwarding this to you so that you do not have to dig through a lot. Kind regards,

Fri, 5 Jul 2024, 12:12
to me

Hey Mateboho,

All good according to me. Thank you for sharing.

Cheers,

Mateboho Ralekhetla <rmateboho@gmail.com> Sat, 6 Jul 2024, 11:59
to

Thank you for having a look. I am glad you are satisfied with the representation.

Kind regards,
Mateboho

Reply Forward

These are emails from Jemma and Aya, respectively, giving feedback after going through the poems made from their narratives.

Appendix 3.1 Phases of data generation and analysis

A3.1.1 Phase 1

Residents

1.
For me participation means
When I attend a workshop and I am involved in the workshop
Whereby there is a group discussion
And I am part of the discussion
And after, we present that on the discussion we had within the group,
That is what participation is for me.

I was with South African Red Cross as a volunteer,
With the youth department
We had conferences,
It was interesting because I was engaged with different provinces,
We exchanged ideas and experiences

There was a part in the South African Red Cross
I was a dissemination officer
I would go to the Eastern Cape regions
And disseminate information about the Red Cross,
When it was formed and the history
It was an interesting job as a disseminator
I travelled a lot
We had a lot of workshops with the National Office
We travelled to Cape Town and Johannesburg.

In the village,
I used to be the secretary to the sub-headman
When we had local meetings I had to record minutes
And because I had a lot of experience in attending meetings and workshops
I would advise them on how you take minutes

In church I am part of the Mothers' Union,
What I can tell you Mateboho is
I am very experienced in being a secretary,
Even at church I am a secretary
Although I am not perfect
I am always asked to be a secretary.

Before I was a CLO for the Tsista Project
I was a CLO for the municipality
When the bridge was being built
And that had exposed me to working with different people,
Like their tempers when they are not being paid
So that opened my mind of being a CLO.

In the Red Cross,
Working with communities is something I enjoyed very much,
Working in an area that is affected by a disaster like shacks are being burnt,
When we had to do an assessment in that area
I was happy to be one of the people going to do the assessment.
I was also exposed in being a first aid instructor
Where I would teach people about first aid all over the Eastern Cape
That also helped me a lot on how to handle people
From different communities.
I enjoyed that very much
There was no weekly work plan
But I was always prepared for anything

Being secretary
When taking a decision in the meeting,
If it is written down on the minutes,
You are able to go back to it
If the minutes are recorded
They serve as proof that a decision was made.

What I don't like is when people are fighting in the meeting,
Where people exchange words in a violent manner
I do not like that.
I like positive meeting
Which will bring change in a positive way

As much as it nice to work with people
It is not easy to work with people when they are not being paid,
And you find that the reason of no payment of employees is not the sub-contractors,
And they also are complaining to the municipality
And it is out of their control
So what I don't like about working with contractors
Are the challenges that are above their pay grade,
I am unable to explain to the employees
And people are angry at them and complained to me because I am the liaison officer
Employees did not understand when you explain to them
Because all they want is to be paid.

The first workshop I went to in Maclear
They had called all the areas within the Tsitsa catchment,
And they had invited the chiefs.
I was a member of the community who was chosen by the chief
To represent my area.

It was a two-day's workshop and we slept over.
I had no clue of what it was about,
I do remember in Tally's first workshop she talked about a dam.
I realised that it is not what I thought it was
That there are talks with people who are near where the dam would be,
What I asked myself was us who live in the upper Tsitsana
How does it concern us?
How will we benefit from the dam because we were included?

There are people from ground truth who came
Saying that they would fix the dongas, and the wetlands
I am hoping things like those will be achieved
Because there are villages where the dongas are a threat to their houses
We are hopeful
Also the wattle that is everywhere,
It was said that there would be some insects that will eat the wattle so it would not grow,
Because the rate of crime has increased
And criminals use the wattle tree as their hiding spot.
Removal of the wattle will help the community very much.

What does participating in the Tsitsa project mean for you?
It means the knowledge I get from the Tsitsa
I can be able to pass it on to the community
the dumping of disposable nappies in the river is not right
So by being involved with the Tsitsa project
Knowing what is right and what is wrong
And the dumping of rubbish at the upper river
Where it will go downstream,
Creating awareness in the community.

This year I have learnt a lot about the field fire
What it does to the soil.
Now that I am part of the tribal committee
I always inform the headman about what field fires do to the environment,
Now that we have these uncontrollable dongas of the field fires,
Heavy rains that cause soil erosion causing the many dongas.

What are the things you do not like when participating in the Tsista project?
There are things that happen that make me feel like I am being treated as a child,
For example,
Someone should first find out why you did not do or complete a task,
We have a network problem,
And a challenge of data.
For example when one of the CLOs does something

It would seem as if all of us are doing the same thing,
But a person must be corrected for his/hers mistake individually
Our phone's whatsapp was outdated
Me personally, I do not have a lot of knowledge about the technology
I only know how to answer a phone and call
Some people are able to talk to us with respect
But others talk to us like children of which I do not like that.

What motivates me is seeing some of the areas,
For example Nomsa's area there is progress,
And that is what I wanted too
I was able to connect LIMA and Rhodes with my ward council.
Nosi would mention that they would struggle to get hold the municipality in Maclear,
But because I am working together with my ward council, I was able to organise a meeting
And the meeting was a success,
So those are the things that motivate me to participate.
Tomorrow there is a Farmers' Association meeting
In which I mentioned to Chris and Nosi.

If the projects ends will you still be informing the community about land restoration?
Yes especially the field fires
Because I have learnt and saw the damage it has caused in the soil
And contributed to soil erosion,
So even if I am not paid by the Tsitsa project I will talk to the community about the damage it causes.

2.
Not sure the year I arrived here in the village
When I got here,
There were a lot of things I took part in like the development of my area
I would assist mainly on the side of taking minutes,
And technology, helping the headman with emails,
Writing of formal letters in administration side.

Even when I took part in those things
I was very interested in the Tsitsa project
When they came with the idea of the restoration of the land.
It would bring opportunities to the village
That will help developing people within the community
With things like creation of jobs and skills.
How people can protect the livestock and crops,
How to decrease the dongas
On top of that will be an opportunity of employment,
That is what made the Tsitsa project to have interest in my mind

I was always the one delegated to attend this workshops
That is why I wanted to participate in this project.
Rhodes University came in
Wanted to implement some of the things that would happen in this project.
Monitors of vetiver grass,
That is where I was most interested
When interviews were held
And you need to have a matric certificate.
I continued to attend the workshops,
I found them to be interesting.

Spha from LIMA came to the council
With the opportunity of employment as a CLO.
I have heard about CLOs
In projects like building of a school or a road
They get paid a lot of money for it.
People came to the council to take part in the interviews
Which I also participated in
I was selected as a CLO.

In Cape Town
Was interested a lot in the sport side,
Even in school I did a diploma in sports development,
I stayed in Cape Town for about five years without being employed,
The only jobs available were in retail and security.
The only way you can get a job is
Having connections or joining the DA
But I was in the ANC.

I worked at a gym
Where we worked with ladies who did not want to lift the weights
But wanted the same pay,
The money was not enough
We could only pay for transport with,
Could not send money home
Which was an embarrassment for me
It was tough times.

I heard that there are opportunities back at the village
I decided to go back.
I also took part in the security business
Which was not safe
Because of the protests that were happening in the company,

I decided no I have to think about my safety I decided to leave the job.

I went back home
Because sport management was something that I was always interested in
I organised people who were interested in sports
Also as a development in the community.
The municipality asked me to represent my ward
In organising of sport events in my ward.

I realised there is a lot that needed to be done with the community,
Which can help the youth to develop and stay out of trouble,
I researched about things that could better the youth.
I realised that will need money so,
I put in some applications to local business to sponsor the new venture
And the municipality
With no luck of response.

People had hope
That the sports programme will have helped,
And because of my huge involvement in Cape Town
As a secretary in the local football association
I assisted a lot

Local businessmen in the village
Not interested much in the programme.
So it was very hard for me trying to start this programme.
I was told to register the project
But it also needed money to register
But that did not work too.

I was active in the ANC a lot,
We worked together in trying to find a way in which we can have electricity.
I worked with Mr Gumede to create structures where we recruited people
And ask the ANC party to help us.
We finally realised that SANCO would be able to help us
We registered.
That is how we were able to fight to get electricity
With the help of a village called Ntatyane.
We even started strikes,
Writing letter to the local councillor,
Telling we will send the letter to the Mayor of Elundini municipality,
We even took the matter to national.
The Mayor came to the community
We had a heated discussion with her

Until she announced that our village would have electricity that year
And within a few months we saw construction happening
And the electricity was put in our village
More opportunity came about after
Like the community development worker
People were able to help with other things.
I expected a lot because
I saw people busy with research
After the research they would make sure that the implementation happens
We were hopeful
That some change will happen,
Job creation and the dongas will be fixed.
There would be camps and fencing for the livestock
People were educated about field fires.
We knew that this project will help us as a community very much.
We saw a lot of progress with the vetiver grass
And people being able to provide for their families,
And job creation of CLO
I know that the CLO have an important job
With the community and the project,
I was disappointed with amount of money that the CLO were receiving
Because I expected much more.

3.
to me participation means
taking part or being involved in in the decision-making
I've participated in the Headman's meetings in my Village,
I always take minutes and I'll write the people who are present
I always ask questions on the meetings
if I want some clarity
to me by asking those questions,
I feel like I'm participating

in the Tsitsa project
I've been involved in many workshops.
my actual role was to clarify to the residents about land and water.
we were divided into three groups.
to my group I was their leader.
the one explaining to them what needs to happen,
I feel like that is also being involved or participation.

I've been participating ever since high school
I have been the Monitor or the monitor in my class.

since I'm now a CLO

a CLO is an ambassador,
I have to be involved in many meetings and many workshops and road shows
I have to contribute,
I can't just sit there and quiet,
that's not participation in my context
just sitting and keeping quiet.

to me participation means
to explain and to ask questions in the meetings
to tell people about this project.

I've also participated in the Sunday school.
We were acting there,
and I was the part of that acting,
I was also an actor there

in the headman meeting,
what I liked about mostly is that
there is always two sides
and there's always a solution,
there must be a solution after we've argued about a certain issue

but my dislike is that
some they're just being negative,
they don't listen to you
since they are all older than you and they just ignore that
'I can hear I can hear from someone younger than me'

I enjoyed being a leader
telling people that me that now I'm writing the names of the noisemakers
I enjoyed being top,
I enjoyed being a leader
But not everyone will like you,
others will vote against you
I believe that I was a good leader at school,
I didn't understand why would people vote against me

What do you think makes a good leader?
respect comes first.
Mutual respect everyone who respects you,
respect him back.

since they are old
I don't know if I can put it like they are illiterate they couldn't write,

they had to write anything about water.
I was telling them that ‘Write these down’
They said yeah,
'you just saying it to just write it yourself
So they were kind of negative

I’m the leader
they were supposed to write
you write, you, not me
But they were just negative.
They thought since I’m young
that I’m the one who can write,
that was my worst dislike.

I did try to help them but they were so ignorant
I don’t but know if they didn’t want to attend that meeting or what
they were not cooperating
we thought you were hiring,

the CLO's role is to be an ambassador
Is actually a link.
I’m working between the residents,
and the Tsitsa project.

what does it mean for you to be involved in a project that deals with taking care of the land?
I enjoy it a lot cuz I am very in love with the ecosystem,

though i have done commercial subjects at high school,
I’m very in love with the nature and the environment in general.
The moment I started to hear the words
I didn’t know that even joabase was a wattle,
I enjoyed, listening to those phrases
and I wasn't familiar to 'cultivate', 'uncultivated land'
I’m studying and as a CLO I've learned a lot,
I think I’m enjoying it.

What is the most exciting for you before you started?
Honestly I didn't understand the CLO,
I didn't know what was my duty until I've read the booklet I got at the induction,

How do I use the land?
Cropping, ploughing.
from here I'm going to plant some spinach
so that's what I enjoy about the land.

and I feel like washing at the river today,

Most of the meetings I have enjoyed
hence I've said I've been learning and I still want to learn more
so I enjoyed I enjoy learning

so what you enjoy most about Tsitsa meetings is Learning?
learning and gaining experience .
I've learned a lot from the residents,
I've also learned a lot from the Tsitsa team

I didn't enjoy acting, qha,
Çause I know I can't speak in front of many people
was force because I didn't and I can't do such things
So I didn't really enjoy it.
I was nervous,
Thats why I'm not passionate to it

Inqela,
It's the headman with the sub-headmen only,
no communals, No residents,
only sub-headmen and the headman,
I'm not allowed to attend it
I don't know why,
 and I always ask them why,
but they don't know,
It's not traditional,
it's some umzekelo.
sis Ntombi is allowed to go to inqela,
I only attend the general meeting
or a meeting one-on-one with the headman or a workshop,
Everyone is not allowed to attend.
but they won't allow you to get in there
and express how you feel or hear what they say about
I'm very curious

Research

4.
in School:
participating in a lot of sport,
that was compulsory at school.
being part of a team.
Also in class,
that was participation

University:
in courses,
but found one on social structure quite cool
because it was engineering,
but that was cognisant of social dimensions.
and refers to these, sport and courses
as organised participation.

Feesmustfall
refers to it as informal participation.
And talks about buy-in.
joining feesmustfall made sense at the time,
what about now?
it was social pressure as well
he found it quite complicated,
and felt the messier aspects of it were necessary

Engineers without borders:
he coordinated projects and learning activities
Open city:
whose purpose was to encourage alternative modes of transport to cars
and promote social cohesion.

Describes participation based on formal and informal.
Formal refers to where strict rules are used to guide operations
such as school and university.
organisations were sort of like a social contract
binding one to what they deemed an important purpose
Places it somewhere between formal and informal

FoodNetwork:
he feels like he was doing more than participate
due to the level of commitment.
went to an international conference,
which he considers as a high level of participation.
taking part in the activist guideline for water,
which he refers to as low level of participation,
based on length of time of being involved.

His experience of sports
was mostly good because he got to hang out with friends on the side
did not really enjoy playing per se,
but felt like he got lucky to have been picked.

most of the things he has participated in
were by choice,
which brought positive vibes,
whereas being forced
led to negative associations of participation.
school painting
as part of engineers without borders activity
is an example of an uncomfortable participatory activity
time consumption
because they were students,
not doing a good job,
and not involving the school.

Now that he thought about it
student movements being flaky
in the way they engaged with communities
that there was not much they could do at the time
due to lack of funds and experience.
But says he enjoyed engineers without borders
because it provided an ideas sharing space
and once again,
meeting new and interesting people.
unrealistic expectations
contributed to his negative

the slow food youth network conference
was a bit of a let down
as it was not activist-focused
as he had expected,
based on what they did in their local context.
at least he made some cool connections with people
who held similar interests about the movement.

Again, we see him getting disappointed
he was drawn into the movement by his interest in food,
the people were also inviting,
and genuine,
and were doing important work,
which he felt okay spending his time dong.

TP:
a protest action for service delivery,
got him thinking
of how it would be made possible

or rural residents to communicate with governing structures
TP advertised something along those lines.
He came in,
found many disconnections within the project,
the fuzzy relationship between TP, DEFF and the implementers.
felt like people were disconnected
from the catchment they worked in,
worked in silos,
with only one person holding them together.
the disconnect sort of made him struggle to find a place,
especially because of how different it was from what he was used to,
when he was used to sharing a working space with colleagues.

the first workshop was a great experience
he saw the residents actually engaging
in what he called organised participation.
But he still feels like the project is too academic,
and does not do much impact on the ground.
But he has had to put his ideals aside
learn the academic way of doing things,
and found it easier to work that way,
even though it still does not resonate with him,
he will be out of there as soon as he can.
He calls the TP an academic exercise,
which will not lead to much tangible impact on the ground.

participation in the TP,
things have been become better for him
since he learned the way things worked
However,
from a facilitator point of view,
the capacity building engagements are not robust enough,
and he worries also that there is a disconnect
between what Rhodes wants from LIMA
and what LIMA can actually offer.
Feels like more depth is required
to make participatory efforts sustainable in people's minds.
time is essential,
but depth in terms of for example,
CLOs getting facilitation experience
through learning words expansion.
Would be better
Since he likes tangible results,
he feels like the grazing management and vetiver aspects of the project hold a lot of potential.
he thinks of participation in this space

in terms of how much value it has added to people's lives,
especially those who have participated for a longer time.
Authority of the people involved
is also a valuable ingredient to promote participation

He feels like the scale of the catchment
and the damage
compared to the available resources
is ridiculous, and pointless
because we might only find ourselves fixing 10 out of 1000 dongas.
maybe the increasing human capacity
in terms of more implementers could make things better,
finds the project quite expensive
for the level of impact it has potential to bring.

In terms of expectations,
he thought there was active people filling gullies or something,
but since he joined the project,
he has not seen people working on that,
which has found to severely frustrating about the DEFF contract.
He enjoyed the theories and exploring them,
but most importantly,
he enjoyed his interactions with the CLOs
and they organised workshops together.
that practical side of it,
not necessarily the academic aspect of it.
dishonesty is the main source of discomfort for him,
where people say they are doing things,
when they are actually not.
Or where certain red flags are ignored.
For instance,
the TP saying their aim is to restore,
when no restoration has been done.
he admits that sometimes his expectations of others
may be a bit unrealistic,
sometimes things are done to please funders,
which he says is not necessarily a bad thing.
he does see value in the way things are done in the TP,
especially the research side,
which he did not quite understand at first.

participation to him
is spending your time and attention on something,
but it differs
on a spectrum of the level of involvement or commitment.

From being told what needs to be done,
to someday being part of the team organising events/activities.
the more time and effort you spend,
the higher you go in the pyramid.
if an activity is referred to as participatory,
his expectation is that
firstly, not one-directional communication,
and secondly, numerous activities.
THAT'S WHAT helps him participate.
So, not boring in other words.

5.
IN school,
it all started with a school trip to the wilderness,
she experienced a strong connection with the earth,
decided to start a society where people would share stories about the environment,
participation part of it started
when she began talking to her peers and school authorities
she had to speak in front of everybody
some of the enabling factors
the architecture dad who drew her vision,
the school authorities,
and the brothers who had inherited a property
but she realised
if you leave, they don't happen.

still in the quest to connect people to the environment,
she started a wilderness club in her new working space
taking walks in the wild

WRC steering committee
that took me into the community of practice of research
I began to participate.
my whole way of working in my life has been networked,
has been engaged actively
where my experience and their experience together
could take something forward

she experienced working with many people,
experienced what competing frames
within a space could cause,
shifted her thinking
to connect people to the environment,
it is also vital to connect with the people who had other interests
to avoid from derailing from the common purpose.

participating at a national level,
this senior man,
not open to listening to new ideas
she realised that bringing people into a room
to participate or work together was not enough
to warrant or bring changes,
putting some effort into building relationships
getting people to understand each other's way of thinking
made participation efforts stand a chance.

New working environment
introduced her to some interesting words
complexity and TD
that helped her to explain some of the ways she had been doing things.
she had an idea
called in some powerful members
to present these ideas.
without important partnerships and relationships among humans,
it might not make sense to relate to the environment

She is a fan of working towards a shared vision,
she uses her persuasive character to her advantage.
it is quite easy to get people on your side if you speak your idea using their language,
listening carefully at how the other person speaks.
She has found interpersonal relationships working better for her
in getting her message across.

being desperate towards achieving certain goals
makes one vulnerable
as other people may use that to their advantage
and leave you hurt.
experiencing new environments
has exposed her to new academic terms,
which helped her explain the way she works.
and she consciously employs those terms
to her life to advocate for the things she wants.
Her experiences of power imbalance in the past
Led to changes in practice
she felt powerless and that led to failure,

idea was brought to her
used her experience from another project to propose the way the TP could work.
approach the senior person and pitched her ideas,
got a meeting and did her magic (persuasion).

the role of relationality,
when you use your relationship with a powerful person
to get what you want
she had to step back due to conflict of interests
which also caused her some tension
nobody ever acknowledging the role she played during the inception
Seeing that there was a gap of engaging people on the ground in the call for bidding,
she just found a way to get people involved
had very little idea of what it was.
her lack of proper knowledge about the concept caused the delay in implementing it.

She got the idea out of her knowledge of the CMFs
as institutional arrangements to get people involved,
She applied the idea of bricolage,
she thought with what she knew,
she could get people involved
She felt like the SAM gave people the opportunity to experience their participation
by watching their ideas progressively being used
towards getting to the bigger picture
through writing everything in the open,
which she also felt it helped
to even-out some hierarchies within the space.

what has worked for her over the years
has been to follow her instinct and just do (practice-led),
find an explanation or academic label after.
We see her acknowledging
how she used to probably notice unjust aspects of her work,
but was just too uncomfortable to flag it.
the idea of social learning also coming from a colleague,
another indication of this notion of having sufficient knowledge before going into the field.
she talks about another student who criticised one of her workshops
which opened her up to starting to letting go of control and watching how things unfold.
she says it has not been the easiest thing,
she is not even sure if she is doing it well.
these encounters that she talks about have definitely made her more self-aware
realising how she may have exercised power over others,
even though she thought she was being helpful.
She calls it respecting the process,
She says participation must be enabling,
not dominating.
Hardest lesson that participation taught her
to let go of control and watch things unfold.
The lack of acknowledgement for her role is re-emphasised here
as a discomfort in participating in the TP space

what satisfied her based on our conversation thus far,
she admitted to the uncomfortable feeling
of admitting that she likes a shared view at the end of her engagements.
she covers the diversity of the views and feelings
with the warm fuzzy feeling brought by things going well on the surface of it.
At least now she has a team
that actually identifies the diversity within the space,
and bring them up during the reflection session afterwards,
and those are used to adapt the way we work.

The TP further contextualised what complexity meant to her,
it was a mixture of emotions from excitement when things worked well,
and disappointment and when they did not.
especially the use of CMFs,
it was a political sabotage,
the DEA knew from the beginning that they would not accept the structure,
but let her waste 3 years working hard.
the power imbalance at play was an institutional one,
which then sabotaged her work.
the TP saw her most vulnerable moments,
and humbled her to become accepting of the things she could not change.
Complexity helped her explain some of the things that happened,
and helped her accept.
went through feelings of being neglected and disrespected in the space.
that affected her participation.
she likes contributing good things as that gives her a deep sense of satisfaction.
but sometimes things do not go according to plan.
participation has led her to needing to engage with her whole self,
physically, emotionally, intellectually.
She has had to open herself up more than just intellectually.

Things that made her uncomfortable have instances where
she felt excluded like the use of isiXhosa to conduct a workshop,
not given fair opportunity to contribute ideas
where some people take other people's ideas forwards as their own to benefit more than her.
the results of her own personality,
her colleague leaving without ever confronting her about her bad behaviour,

The highlight of her participatory experience
where for the first time she saw people really free and talking to each other,
really engaging with the tasks at hand.
For her, that was true participation.
Another one had been the big CMF meeting, where they almost had everyone in the room.

the big meeting is something she felt like was difficult to achieve, and they actually did it.
it moved from being about counting the numbers,
to actual engagement.
She refers to the initial engagements as mostly been talking at people
instead of talking to them since they could hardly follow the conversation,
they obviously nodded even if they did not hear much
due to the respectful approach that used to address them.

she had hoped that her interaction with the residents
would at least invoke a sense of agency in them
to want to participate
in spaces that deal with the subject of land and water.
But instead realised
Participation in a land restoration project
is much easier described as the tangible things
such as planting grass to prevent erosion,
and deciding on places to restore,
because those are positive see able things.
Whereas things like capacity building
may seem a bit far-fetched, as benefits are not immediate
...even though they form an important foundation for the work that is being done.

6.
“I think every person is different to start with”

participating in the process of discussion
or any forum,
or informally with your friends, chit-chatting with friends,

it falls down to various aspects,
I am shy person by nature
An only child,
School teachers would just put one on spot to speak
Made me very uncomfortable,
style not conducive for my shy nature
The more confident carried their voice,
Which was not unusual for me
Had to recite work in front of the class,
Which was obviously hard for me.

Moved to another country
I never really spoke the language before
Lack of language command deprived me from participating
In class or even with friends or other people

Coped by sharing my ideas and thoughts
Through one-on-one conversations
During breaks or leisure times,
Through smaller group discussions.
That's how my voice would end up in the bigger group

In university,
Every task had to be done in groups
I found it suitable for my nature.
Presentations were part of the learning style
Definitely not easy for me
Not just due to my shy nature
But also having to do them in a second language
But I had to put herself together and do them
Because they were mandatory.

I feel like it gets better with age,
But the style used to initiate participation,
Could either allow or inhibit participation
Intimidating people cannot improve confidence

In the TP
Small group or informal chats mechanism still work
One starts building good relationships with colleagues
And you're made to feel that your input is valid
And language is not a bit big factor
Because it's a multicultural environment
where your sentence does not necessarily need to be perfect/professional
The feeling I get out of the space,
That my ideas are recognised by others
Is all that matters.
Sometimes we create intimidating or constraints within ourselves
Which make it stressful
Whereas the space is really enabling.

When entering a new working space,
My first sense is to hold back a little
Just to assess what is going on
Then start to gain confidence
As I become familiar with some of the people around me
Or when I start to connect with others
Because they make me feel respected and valued
Then I start to open up
Assessing the situation is so that you can find your place

In the TP it sort of looks like most people have found their place
And are able to express their opinions freely,
Even if you're taking a back seat
Your opinion is sought

As a facilitator,
Knowing the context is not enough,
The social dynamics too are vital,
Yet they take a while
And therefore require that tools and approaches be used
That will give people the opportunity to spell them out.
I sort of struck the power dynamic button by mistake
Because on the surface,
Everything looked okay,
Everyone was friendly to each other
Until that moment.
The act was beneficial for part of the group
But not for the other, more powerful group.
The problem was not that I divided them into groups,
but it's the way I went about it that upset the other group.

7.
Mag's 1st participation memory
comes from the stories she was told
refers to that part of her life a being participation
because they were being taught stuff,
and played games together;
and most importantly for her
were the rules guiding how things had to be done
otherwise there would be consequences.
She suspects or supposes that some of her characteristics
like leadership and bossiness
came from that part of her life
since she felt more entitled due to owning most of the stuff.

Parents: divorced,
changed schools,
separated from all the kids she grew up with

In new school
compulsory sports
Others people always involved
ended up enjoying
even though it was not by choice to join in the first place
Was also involved in acting and singing,

thought that's what she was going to do
which was influenced by her father's side of the family.

High school, new town
her character of always wanting to get everyone involved
as coming from her father's bubbly, open, friendly, and easy-going personality
her strict organizational skills from her mum,
who needed her help as the eldest child to take her of her brother,
She does not recall a time
when she became so nervous that she could not speak
because she practises a lot.
even though she gets nervous,
she is not afraid to go up to a stranger and introduce herself,
that's part of her nature
of trying to get everybody involved.

Went to another country (overseas),
looked down upon,

Journalism and drama

Head girl in std 9
she stood up for herself and her friendship to the headmaster
by saying she would rather not have the position if it was going to cost her her friendship.
She suspects that it was the reason she ended up being made head prefect
they realized that she was not going to be pushed around.
This, and a moment in her third year when she decided to question a decision during dance audition,
realized that there was also too much to lose
in order to attain the famous status,
including her morals.
she knew from then that she was going to give up the dream,
she actually found it more fun working in production,
where she could also build on her organizational skills,
learn how things needed to be done.
she knew from a very stage of her life what her values were,
that they helped decide on what she was willing or not willing to do.

done a lot of casual jobs,
she had to learn her place.
In secretary jobs, she could not speak,
while in stock management, she was part of the decision-making
she was okay with that,
because that was like her job description.

behind the scenes as she previously referred to it.
hierarchy was necessary in that kind of space,
someone needed to tell others what needed to be done,
others needed to listen and follow the instructions.
she refers to the space as not participatory
because she never voiced her opinion,
all she needed to do was coordinate what she was told the client wanted.
she describes the space as client-based and materialistic
as long as the client could pay,
the client got what they wanted,
it did not matter what lengths they had to go to get it done

Sci-fest Africa
She was the manager in a team of 5 or 6 people
She knew that each member had a specific role in the team,
their opinions were very important
towards making the team effective.
found people who had been working together,
with a particular system,
which was quite different from hers
she did was propose that they each harnessed the strengths of each other's systems
to establish one that could accommodate all of them.
While in the space,
she got to be aware of the confusion
causes people in the way she thought about things
immediately communicated this with her colleagues,
which then opened communication and better relationships.

Working with Tal
did not understand why so much fuss was made over complexity
when to her it was so obvious that the world was complex.
she had physically witnessed interconnectedness in the film industry.
Landed the job through Tal's friendship with her parents.
when asked to do a masters,
she would have to give up another job,
whether it was a good financial decision.

a decision was made to actually do a masters,
her starting to research about the area
sort of trying to find a point of entry,
Firstly, she found it important to connect with an ongoing project within the catchment,
she needed the chief's approval.
Surprised that there was not prior contact with the chief
Felt team did not respect their context
context to her is very important to acknowledge and observe.

Apart from the research protocols,
part of it was due to her personal value system.
also came her experience of being involved in CMF workshops before
where she was mostly a listener and an observer
because it was mostly run in the local language that she did not understand.
She had to adapt and learn
to follow the discussion without knowing the actual words being uttered

8.
playing:
for me that that type of participation is, is easy.
it's a space where you don't talk much,
you just show what you can do
is participation because you become part of a team.
in sports,
you have a role to play
easier to participate without much talking
fear to sound stupid

playing form the first memory of participation when she was a child,
She does not remember participating much as a child,
not that such spaces did not exist,
she just chose not to.
She avoided talking
so could not sound stupid.
talking in these spaces as driven by mostly confidence.
she realised this early in her childhood
that she would keep to herself
never involved myself in anything that had to do with talking.
It was easier
you know how you're so scared that you're gonna say something stupid.
Or something that's not good enough
so you're like, I'm just going to shut up so I'm safe.
I don't want to look like an idiot.
I'm just gonna look like someone who doesn't know anything.
so sports also for me,
I think it's a big way that you feel like you're participating
every person has a role to play.
So you feel honoured even if you're sitting on the bench,
you still like, participate somehow.
Because you're all working towards the same goal.
people can correct each other as you go,
and your mistakes and stuff,
be able to tell instead of destroying, I think.

I know study groups,
you sort of come together with whatever you studied,
you talk about it, too,
share information.
Help each other.

I wasn't a talker,
before Mike dragged me into the project.
well I was a talker,
but not in spaces that mattered.

attending courses,
there's like, that space to sort of participate.
But it's like, a different form of
I think study groups.
participating in courses
could be fair and equal,
because the opportunity is granted,
through questions,
but taking it on
depend on individual traits of comfort.

TP was my most talkative space
in terms of making contribution.
of course it was not easy at first
because I used to feel out of place
due to firstly, race,
secondly, language,
certain people speaking really fast
then some too experienced,
they would try to make conversation
but I would be overwhelmed
by all the stories;
and found it hard to understand the terminology used sometimes.
my coping strategy was going up and down, (run errands)
so that I did not have to listen to the boring stuff
that I could hardly follow.

the transition took like 2 years
for me to start feeling like she had a voice
and her input was valuable.
I don't I don't quite know when that happened.
But yeah, I mean, now I know that I can participate.

there are spaces
where, sometimes unintentionally,
you find that there is no space for other people to engage
because other individuals are overpowering the conversation.
Then because I feel like I know they listen to me,
I try to speak up,
but then they just say okay,
then move on to another point.
But by now I know when to participate
and when to keep to herself.

my experience of attending a municipality meeting,
I felt unacknowledged or unrecognised.
I received an invite, late
I was not sure what was required of me.
I Introduced myself,
but nobody responded.
I feel like sometimes people in these spaces
silently select who participates
and who does not
based on relevance or importance.
To decide on where to participate,
there needs to a purpose,
which will make a difference somehow.
even if my input is acknowledged or not,
but that it makes impact somehow.
I'd hate my life
if I had to participate in unimpactful activities,
my morals would just not let her.

Zoning out helps
cope with frustrating situations
that I do not have the power to change
bullies,
those people who dominate the space
and intimidate others.
Competitive people
who leave when things do not go their way,
and people who cheat

change for me, I want to make an impact in someone's life.
So currently, I feel like I am
makes the person recognisable.

her school teacher who used to say that
empty vessels make the most noise.
sometimes when the people that don't talk much,
when they do speak, people are surprised by their responses.
In sports,
you needs to just show up when needed
study groups where one needs to be on top of things
taking charge when necessary.
attributes those qualities to being a first born,
it comes naturally to take charge when no one is,
no one has their back
But if you're a firstborn,
you're standing strong
and you learn to be a survivor.
I've learned to be my own.

acquiring knowledge over time builds one's confidence,
learning about your space
and how to behave in different spaces.
I think being who I am
and the job that I'm doing,
I can't, I can't be the standard myself everywhere I go.
So like, you have to learn the different spaces
and the different contexts

the TP space
we build each other, instead of breaking each other down.
being listened to
allows one to open up instead of breaking your spirit
there is a strong support structure,
everyone rooting for you,
that allows one to open up and grow in their given role.
when they see that contribution is positive, then they like, hold on to it,
the competence that I have,
It grew as I was part of the project.
it's easy to be the true to reach your potential or even build towards it

being given some form of responsibility,
a specific role to play,
forced her to sit up and listen
...concentrate,
the group now looked to her for answers
So she became a voice for her division,
and she was trusted within her role,
which also made her realise that there was room to participate

even though most of the thinking still comes from the research side,
has improved from coming from the boardroom into the community.
they opened up and gave room for more input from the ground,
which increased their understanding of the context.
just realizing that,
it's not about us,
it's not our space.
We may have been brought into that space to work
we're still outsiders,
if we're going to do anything to that area,
without the people that live there, then we're wasting our energy.

now there are some development support activities
that directly benefit the residents
only few villages have engaged with the project,
if the project was confined to just a few villages
their impact would be greater.

the positive transformation that sees in the people
some have started businesses
and are more confident.
change for me,
I want to make an impact in someone's life.
So currently, I feel like I am

Her current role comes with a lot of talking,
and meetings
meetings that are not so fun during covid
as face-to-face meetings came with the benefit
of connecting and interacting with new people.
she realised how much people underestimate the power of shared space,
where learning is mutual.
happy with being able to create or influence
the creation of those learning spaces
for the diverse stakeholders in the project.
being able to bring the voices of the community into the boardroom,
because it makes her feel like they are not completely shut out of the process.
loves her role in the project
it exposes her to spaces that matter,
and influential people.
It’s about creating relationships and networks.

Her personality allows her to deal with different issues

venting helps her to cool down.
Likes it when people bring their issues forward
they have a chance to be fixed.

Likes the fact that I am looking at the meaning of participation
as most people assume what it means.
Feels like the findings could help with doing it better as a project,
with better understanding
of what it might mean for the different people involved.
Also refers to being aware of how new students
are unintentionally left out during engagements with senior
NON-ACADEMIC SUPPORT?
9.
Forestry:
He refers to his experience of working in a plantation,
which is usually a large land filled with trees for timber.
unlike a car garage,
which is safe by just locking the doors,
a plantation requires the involvement of other parties
because one can't do it alone.
Goes on to use a rugby scorer to say that for the goal to happen,
team effort enables the goal to happen, meaning,
other people's participation.
For participation to take place
there needs to be other people involved
where one lays their views,
and they are listened to
At the end of the day,
one needs to be able to say,
I have a contribution in that thing.

He also refers to the work that I am doing as participation
because I am looking for information,
which I do not currently have,
I need to look around and create some space
an environment conducive for me to get what I want.
says that participation is a broad thing,
just like a rugby field or a cricket field,
with players participating,
but not forgetting that spectators too participate
they're sharing views of what the players should've done,
even though they are strangers,
they are brought together (they communicate) by their common goal for their team.

In the TP,

he was coincidentally in the area for another project,
met the people who were working on the launch of the TP,
they heard what he was doing,
they invited him to be part of their launch.
they realized that he knew the area better than them,
they listened to his idea on how to go about doing
starting with the area where his team had already started doing some work.
he had a contribution in bringing the research aspect into the project
after making them realise that decisions could not just be taken from just looking.
the magnitude of the task at hand was huge.
He also participated in making local people the critical aspect of the project.

The most fundamental motivation for him to participate
is whether something meets up with his values,
topics around nature and natural resources tend to catch his attention
anything that is developmental or seeks to leave a legacy
or develop other people.
wants his name to be remembered positively not negatively.
Red flag for him is a rigid facilitator,
who is not open to different views
or different ways that people may phrase their ideas.
it is either this way or the highway.
So, where even the lowest view is rather rephrased to fit the purpose
than disregarded altogether.
Where time is wasted,
which refers to losing focus of the topic at hand
and derailing to other casual ones
or totally unrelated to the purpose.

10.
Context plays a huge part in the effectiveness of participation.
participation within a system is made up of different moving parts,
one part ignites the other until the car moves.
the TP for instance is made up of different stakeholder groups,
some doing research to better understand the system,
some facilitating community engagement,
some providing local knowledge and understanding of the system.
within the system itself,
there are different levels of participation,
and different groups and institutions
where different people participate.

However,
their perspectives about their environment are not homogenous
even if they belong to a similar group,

that is an important feature as well in a participatory system.
an example of grass,
one member might view it as food for their animals,
while another member sees thatching material for their house.

being overlooked and ignored,
sometimes makes me not want to buy-into the system
I was going to be overlooked anyways.
in school sometimes
other kids are not even considered for leadership positions
because of the activities that they participate in, like music
that are looked down upon.
even though they do and contribute a lot in the school activities,
you find that their efforts are not recognised or are taken for granted.

It's important to consider those who may feel ignored within a space,
because everyone's views are important.
it might be difficult to manage everyone's expectations about the process,
but if a decision had to be made,
that went against other people within the room,
make it a point to explain why the decision was better over the other one.

the TP has mastered effective engagement with the communities,
from forming good relationships with traditional leadership,
to managing to incorporate local perspectives into the decisions that are made.
the presence of the working groups that are made up of local people
who are embedded in the community is another important aspect about the TP,
they are able to engage other community members on a daily basis,
and could find out things like whether they are happy with a course of action taken by the TP.
another important thing to ensure effective participation is trust,
having people on the ground that people can trust has also worked well for the TP.
people have had issues with how (methods) participation was undertaken,

the TP's approach
through traditional leadership has worked well too,
it also worked for another catchment
but,
other people refuse or are uncomfortable
to work with the traditional leadership because it leads to nepotism,
and the benefit does not trickle down to people who need them.
So, they prefer political leadership,
but I am not a fan because ward councillors change after 5 years,
and that means new relationships need to be built with the new person
who takes over the position,

it goes back to context
there maybe are places where that kind of political system works,
but it might not work in the rural contexts that we work.
I am confident that there is trust between us and the leaders,
they do their best to disseminate benefits among community members.

UCP:
proud to a member of the project,
it's like a piece of the puzzle or a link in a chain,
and forming part of the bigger narrative.
the secretariat does a great job
of being inclusive of every partner,
even though some may not be that active.
What I like about it
is just being given the opportunity to report and get expert advice
that one can trust.
Learning from those experienced people within the project
a huge advantage,
and many opportunities are shared within the partnership
and that is where most of our organisational jobs have come from.
such relationships are important for creating opportunities,

participation should also not be a one-way thing,
where not only those who initiate need to make an effort,
but those who are being engaged too
need to put in some kind of effort to make it work.

University:
participated in sports and societies,
were nice releases from studying,
by being active and having fun,
made me feel like part of the large university community
they were an opportunity to learn new things,
derived other opportunities other than learning.
met some cool people, and created networks
that I feel might not have been possible without those opportunities.
I have a very unlikely best friend,
who is quite different from me,
but we connected through one of the university activities that we participated in together,

One of the things that tick me off in a space
is when considering people's lives within their environment is not done effectively,
is tokenistic, without any effort to make it work.

for example,
one company did not do any effort to advertise stakeholder consultation meeting
just put an ad in the newspaper, which nobody really reads
then ticked that off their to-do list
because even though affected people did not come,
they had followed what the Law required from them.

time is needed to nurture relationships and trust,
and therefore meaningful participation.
I remember a misunderstanding
between my team and a community,
which led us back to the drawing board
we thought we were at the signing stage.

"I think that one of the biggest challenges in participation,
is making sure everyone is participating,
everyone is understanding everyone is heard,
and a decision or an outcome from that participation is made
based on everyone's beliefs and understanding."

another challenge of participation is the issue of power disparity,
especially within rural communities
where one's power over certain resources
gets more opportunities to speak in these spaces.
could be money, agricultural resources, etc.
in rangeland management,
livestock owners feel more entitled to the space than the other users
because livestock ownership is a form of wealth, and therefore power.
it's those kinds of local dynamics that present a challenge for participation,
and need to be handled with care,
especially when looking to highlight the voices of the less powerful.

The TP:
Our expectation as an organisation was that we were going to do a certain role ,
were disappointed to find that the already existing organisation wanted to influence everything
We were expected to take a backseat,
Our suggestions shut down
because the other team had been in the space longer,
and knew the context a little bit better,
which put them in better position to know what would work and what wouldn't.

What created tension for our team was
we were not given the opportunity to lead,
but then later blamed for it,

was unfair because we were forced to follow the lead of the other organisation.

the pandemic forced the teams to rely on each other
due to the restriction of movement,
relationship has blossomed,
trust each other for different roles.
their team has also now settled in much better
since the whole misunderstanding at the beginning.
they were finding a place within the space,
and it seems they have finally landed,
but it took them close to a year to do it,
the pandemic came just at the right time for them,
and their roles were sort of like enhanced.
What helped the situation also
was their ability to adapt to the circumstances they found themselves in,
as opposed to what they had expected.
another challenge was the fact that taking a seat back
meant they were behind on deliverables,
and so when the pandemic hit,
they had time to rework their deliverables
and sign a new contract.
So, they were under pressure to deliver to their employer,
which made things quite difficult for them.

Their engagement method was also shut down
because that was not how things were done then,
they preferred it because on top of its benefit of being mainly community-driven,
their team had better experience with it.
initially it used to be the other team teaching the community
the team's understanding of the catchment
and how it worked.
But that seems to be slowly changing.

To close his story,
he just wanted to comment on the fact that he thinks things are going really well
in terms of engaging the community,
and getting the views of the community into the work being done.
he thinks that the team has carried out participation really well.

A3.1.2 Phase 2

1. it represents the participant's story of what participation means for the participant, then moves to where she participated or the participatory roles she has played before. Some of the benefits of having participated in the different roles, and motivations for her participation then follow before going into the challenges she has encountered during some of the experiences.

For me participation means
I attend a workshop
I am involved in the workshop
There is a group discussion
We present
Conferences
was engaged with different provinces
Exchanged ideas and experiences
Disseminate information
Used to be the secretary
Had to record minutes

Roles played/where participated
South African Red Cross as a volunteer
I was a dissemination officer
I used to be the secretary to the sub-headman
Even at church I am a secretary
I was a CLO for the municipality
Part of the tribal committee
Tsitsa project CLO

Benefits
I travelled a lot
I was also exposed in being a first aid instructor
Exposed me to working with different people
Opened my mind of being a CLO
I would teach people about first aid
Also helped me a lot on how to handle people
I enjoyed that very much

This year I have learnt a lot about the field fire
What it does to the soil.
Now that I am part of the tribal committee
I always inform the headman about what field fires do to the environment,

Motivations
Working with communities is something I enjoyed very much
If the minutes are recorded
They serve as proof that a decision was made.

As a member of the community chosen by the chief to represent my area
I had no clue of what it was about,
I realised that it is not what I thought it was
How does it concern us?

How will we benefit from the dam because we were not included?

People came saying they would fix the dongas and wetlands,
I am hoping things like those will be achieved
The dongas are a threat to people's houses
We are hopeful

It was said that there would be some insects that will eat the wattle
The rate of crime has increased
Criminals use the wattle tree as their hiding spot
Removal of the wattle will help the community very much

The knowledge I get
I can be able to pass it on to the community
Knowing what is right and what is wrong
Creating awareness in the community

Progress/ success,
I was able to connect LIMA and Rhodes with my ward council.
Because I am working together with my ward council, I was able to organise a meeting
The meeting was a success,
Those are the things that motivate me to participate.

So even if I am not paid by the Tsitsa project
I will talk to the community about the damage it causes
Especially the field fires
I have learnt and saw the damage it has caused in the soil
And contributed to soil erosion

The challenges/ Dislikes
People are fighting in the meeting,
People exchange words in a violent manner
People not paid,
Unable to explain to them
They don't listen
All they want is to get paid
Being treated like a child,
Not asked why I failed
Not talking to me with respect

Preferences/recommendations
I like positive meeting
Bring change in a positive way

Someone should first find out why you did not do or complete a task,

A person must be corrected for his/her mistake individually

2. The story presented here takes us to places where the participant has participated, then takes us to why or the motivations for his participation. He tells us some of his expectations upon the start of most of the activities he participated in, and the consequences of unmet expectations.

Where
I did a diploma in sports development
I worked at a gym
I also took part in the security business,
I arrived here in the village
When I got here,
I took part in like the development of my area
Taking minutes,
And technology, helping the headman with emails,
I was active in the ANC a lot,

Motivations
Was interested a lot in the sport side

For years without being employed,
Only jobs available were in retail and security
Which was not safe
I decided to leave the job

The money was not enough
This was an embarrassment for me
It was tough times.

The only way you can get a job was
Having connections or joining the DA
But I was in the ANC.

I heard that there are opportunities back at the village
I decided to go back
I was always interested in sport management
I organised people who were interested in sports
Also as a development in the community
The municipality asked me to represent my ward

The development of my area
I was very interested in the Tsitsa project
The idea of the restoration of the land
I was always the one delegated to attend these workshops

Monitors of vetiver grass,
That is where I was most interested
But I did not qualify
I continued to attend the workshops,
I found them to be interesting.

Success
SANCO would be able to help us
We registered
That is how we were able to fight to get electricity
With the help of a village called Ntatyane.

We even started strikes,
Wrote a letter to the local councilor,
Telling him we will send the letter to the Mayor
We even took the matter to national.
The Mayor came to the community
We had a heated discussion with her

Until she announced that our village would have electricity that year
Within a few months we saw construction happening
Electricity was installed in our village
More opportunities came about after
Like the community development worker
People were able to help with other things.
Expectations and hope
People had hope
That the sports programme will have helped,
Local businessmen in the village
Not interested much in the programme.
So it was very hard for me trying to start this programme
It also needed money to register
But that did not work too.

I expected a lot because
I saw people busy with research
After the research they would make sure that the implementation happens

We were hopeful
That some change will happen,
Job creation and the dongas be fixed.
There would be camps and fencing for the livestock
People were educated about field fires.
We knew that this project will help us as a community very much.

We saw a lot of progress with the vetiver grass
People being able to provide for their families,

And job creation of CLO
I know that the CLO have an important job
With the community and the project,
I was disappointed with amount of money that the CLO were receiving
Because I expected much more.

worked with ladies who did not want to lift the weights
but wanted the same pay,
we could only pay for transport with,
could not send money home

A3.1.3 Phase 3: Narrative/prose poems (chronological)

1:1. Residents

I have FOMO

To me participation means to take part or be involved in the decision-making, it means to explain and to ask questions in the meetings.

I have *FOMO*, Fear of missing out, but in a good way. I'm curious; I don't want to miss out. I just want to be current and updated, know what is happening to my community.

I enjoyed being a class monitor, being a leader, holding the power to write noisemakers, being top! I believe I was a good leader, but not everyone will like you. So, they will vote against you.

In Sunday school, I remember being forced to take part as an actor. I was so nervous; I did not enjoy speaking in front of many people. I would not act ever again, even though I have FOMO.

In my village headman's meetings, I write minutes and take the register. Asking questions for clarification, that's how I participate. After a discussion, there must be a solution. But they won't take advice from me, because I am young. Sometimes I feel like going home, because no one is listening to me. They even talk over me, maybe it will be better if I sit and kept quiet. Sometimes it feels like an attack! But I have FOMO!

Because I have FOMO, I go to the ward councillor's meetings, hoping he will talk about improving services in my small village. Only ward committee would be present, because the ward councillor lives so far. But I did meet with him sometimes, and he listened, because of my association with the Tsitsa Project, HE LISTENED.

Youth meetings are held too far from home. I needed transport to attend; therefore, I could not attend. I am attending the next one, because I have FOMO! I want to know what they plan to do with the donations we got.

Inqela, it's the headman with the sub-headmen only. No communal, no residents, they won't allow you to get in there, to express how you feel or hear what they talk about. I'm very curious, I'm part of the community, I should know. I've never heard them coming with feedback. Because I have FOMO, I want to know where that money from fines goes!

A CLO is an ambassador; I have to be involved in many meetings and many workshops and road shows. I have to contribute; I can't just sit there, quiet. That's not participation in my context, just sitting and keeping quiet. The CLO's role is to be an ambassador, a link between the residents, and the Tsitsa project

I still want to learn more, and I have experienced the joy of learning, and gaining experience in the Tsitsa project. I am now familiar with words like wattle, and phrases like to cultivate, and uncultivated land. I am eager to learn more, from both the Tsitsa team and fellow residents. Because I have FOMO! They listen; they listen to me all the time.

Sometimes it's like they force me to participate, when my name is called, and I am asked for my thoughts. I like it sometimes when I do have an answer, but sometimes I don't. I am reminded of my high school days, when I did not raise my hand, but I would get it right when selected. I misjudge myself. I'm not sure; maybe I doubt if it's really correct. But the pain of someone saying what you were thinking, but you missed out because you did not raise your hand. So, being picked, I feel more confident because you can see me, you can read me. It's not a fully bad thing, but it's not good either.

Enjoy working with people

For me participation is when I attend workshops, I am involved in the workshop; there is a group discussion and I am part of the discussion, within the group, we present; that is what participation is for me.

I was with South African Red Cross as a volunteer, with the youth department, we had conferences, it was interesting, we engaged with other provinces; we exchanged ideas and experiences. I was also a dissemination officer; I found it interesting because we travelled a lot; and I enjoy working with people.

Working with communities was something that I enjoyed very much; I was always happy to be deployed in affected areas, I got exposed to new skills, which I used to teach others. I also learned how to handle different communities. I really enjoyed it. There was no weekly plan, but I was always prepared for anything.

Though not perfect, I always get asked to be a secretary; in my village local meetings, and in church. I am very experienced at being a secretary. Being a secretary is about recording minutes, which serve as proof that a decision was taken.

In meetings, I don't like it when people fight, or use violent words. I prefer a positive meeting that will bring change in a positive manner.

Even though I enjoy working with people, it is not easy when they are not being paid, they need answers from you as their leader, but you are unable to explain because it is beyond your control. They also don't understand, because all they want is to be paid. But such experiences teach you to deal with different tempers, and they open your mind.

When I first engaged with the Tsitsa project, I had been delegated to represent my community at a meeting. I had no clue what it was about. To my surprise, they talked about the dam, that's when I realised that it was not what I had thought it was. I asked myself, how does this concern my community, how will we benefit when we stay so far? I was not doing anything in the traditional council house then, just a community member.

We've had people who had come before the Tsitsa project who promised to restore the land; fix dongas

and wetlands to be specific. We are hopeful that the Tsitsa project will achieve those. People's houses are in danger due to dongas, while crime rate is high, criminals use wattle as hiding spots, because it's everywhere.

The Tsitsa project has been a platform to gain knowledge that I can share with my community. Like the fact that dumping rubbish into the upper river, they will end up downstream; so, I create awareness in the community. This year what stood out for me were the effects of veld fires on the soil, and I have shared this information with my village leadership. Even if I am not paid by the Tsitsa project I will talk to the community about the damage it causes.

I live and work in the rural areas, so when I go sleep in town, it is nice for me; it shows that I am working, unlike always being in the village. I like that about the Tsitsa Project, it makes me travel. The course also helped equip me, even though it was difficult.

What motivates me is seeing some of the areas, there is progress that is what I want too. I also like to use my connections to link different people; Sne would mention that they would struggle to get hold of the municipality, I was able to organise a meeting, because I work with my ward council; those are the things that motivate me to participate;

We have a network problem, and a challenge with the work phones; I do not have a lot of knowledge about technology, I only know how to answer a phone call. The one thing I do not like is being treated like a child, where assumptions are made without asking me, or mistakes of individuals being generalised, that is not respectful. But we continue with the work because we are getting paid.

We were hopeful

I was always into sports, since high school, I struggled with academics; I changed schools so I could improve my talent; I did my diploma in sports development in Cape Town. I stayed for so long without being employed; I had to settle for low paying jobs, like security and retail.

I worked at a gym, with ladies who did not want to lift the weights, but wanted the same pay. The money could only cover transport, nothing to send home. This was an

embarrassment for me, times were hard. I could hardly afford to buy myself food. Elders do not understand, they just knew that I was working and getting paid.

Security on the other hand, was not safe due to protests. So, for my safety I decided to leave; I heard that there are opportunities back at the village that could pay the same. By that time I realised I was not going to use my diploma like I had envisioned. The only way you can get a job is having connections or joining the DA, but I was in the ANC.

I went back home for greener pastures; I was not getting any younger. I took part in village development, even assisted the headman with some administration work like sending emails, and writing formal letters. I took minutes in meetings.

When I got home, I did some research on how to better the youth. Then realised I could use my love for sports, to empower the youth, and keep them out of trouble. I gathered the youth, with the aim to start a sports programme. The municipality asked me to represent my ward in organising sport events in my ward.

I did my best to get the programme started, but it came down to one thing, money! I applied, and applied for sponsorships, even to the municipality, but not a single response. Local businessmen had no interest in the programme, which made my job very difficult. I tried to register it, but that also required money. So that too failed.

People had hope; because of my huge involvement in Cape town as a secretary in the local football association, I assisted a lot, but you will notice that there are different lifestyles between the two places; things happen quickly in CPT, there are a lot of sponsors there.

I was advised to get in touch with a social worker, that someone was assisted by that connection to get funding; I realised that corruption is a big problem in the Eastern Cape; I lost hope because of the lack of support.

I was active in the ANC, I joined a fight for service delivery; we did not hold any positions at the time; we followed many Channels of communication, we wrote letters, we protested; the mayor had not honoured the previous request, we threatened to involve national office; people were shocked when she came; and we had a heated discussion. We fought until one day when it was announced that we would get

what we wanted. With that came more opportunities, job opportunities.

We started fighting amongst ourselves; some areas had given up hope; some people saw us as heroes, but others were jealous of our success, and said there was going to be electricity anyway; but we knew that government listens to what the people need.

Even though I took part in these things, the Tsitsa project had caught my interest. When they spoke about land restoration, I saw job opportunities, skills development; how to protect livestock and crops, and how to decrease dongas.

I saw people busy with research; after the research, some change will happen. When we saw white people, we were hopeful because they get things done. Hopeful that implementation would start, job creation, dongas fixed, people educated about veld fires. The project would bring changes to our villages.

I got delegated to attend a workshop, that's how I first participated. Rhodes University came; they wanted to hire monitors for vetiver grass. That is where I was most interested, but during interviews, they needed a matric certificate. I continued to attend workshops, I found them interesting. We saw a lot of progress with the vetiver grass, and people being able to provide for their families. That made us hopeful.

The opportunity of employment as a CLO, most people left the interviews, after realising it was educated and white people conducting the interviews. I had high expectations; I knew that the CLO had an important job with the community and the project. I was disappointed at how CLOs were treated; they are not seen as important as I thought. I was also disappointed with amount of money that the CLOs received, because I expected more.

Those challenges made me look at it differently; we were so excited and happy to have jobs after such a long time of not working; looking forward to being able to feed our families, but the money was not much; We could not even get the Covid-19 grants, because we had jobs. But in the Tsitsa, people were not jealous about sharing knowledge; we even received open posts that we could apply for.

It teaches us about nature, farming, land restoration, and keeping our soil healthy for the next generation; I love that.

It has motivated me to participate, and encouraged us as a community to do better, for ourselves, and for the community.

Another thing that motivates me is the energy that I get from the people that I work with, who are passionate about their work. It gives me courage and opportunity to participate in the project. They will teach us what they know, and listen to the knowledge we have about our catchment.

Tom lets us influence decision-making the most; he is patient; he encourages people to contribute, even if they think what they have to say does not matter. He is respectful and gentle to all the participants.

Knowing what you say won't be considered or taken forward to assist in other things discourages someone to contribute or raise a concern. Sometimes people can be asked to raise their concerns, but because they are afraid, they keep quiet. But once they are away from the facilitators, they have a lot to say and many concerns. Also if one person stands up to raise the concern, no one backs that person.

That first secretary position gave me experience

I used to be a regular church member, until one day when I got elected as the secretary for the women's association. Shocked, doubt running through my mind, I can't do this; there is someone who can do a better job than me. Should I stop going to church? But maybe they saw something in me, something that I can contribute. Words of encouragement from fellow church members lifted me up, and I did it.

A secretary's job is very important, the minutes they write act as a reminder of decisions taken. When everyone is stuck, and has forgotten, I was able to free the meetings with what I have recorded in the minutes. These records made other provinces respect us when we travelled, so the secretary's job is very important. It gave me confidence, and trust in myself to what I need to do. I gained experience to speak in front of many people.

When I was elected to be a secretary in other places, like in the SGB of our local school, and the traditional council, it came easily. Due to the experience I got as a secretary at church. It gave me great experience to work with different people.

Currently I am holding a supervision position for someone, not an easy task. Constantly being tested on how I deal with

different matters, trying to resolve it all before it gets to the superiors' ears. It helped me learn how to work with different people

When I started working for the Tsitsa project, I remember feeling so frustrated by the language barrier. It was my first time working with people who speak English, I was not comfortable to speak English; they tried translation, but communication was not effective. I thought of giving up, but my stipend came, and suddenly, I could achieve certain things; I decided to give it a chance.

The project grew bigger; it was not just about water sampling anymore, we attended workshops, and had to explain our roles in the project. With my church and traditional council experiences, that was not too difficult for me. The only challenge was, doing this in front of white people; I had never been in that situation before. But I was able to overcome that fear

With these workshops came better understanding of the project. I never used to notice the river, but now, I am interested in what happens in the river. In the beginning I just went to the river and collected the water. I gained a lot of experience and knowledge when attending these workshops

I also planted vetiver grass. We were told it would close the dongas. We formed an SMME, and I became the secretary. I have grown; there is a lot I have gained a lot like, talking with people, working well with people, together to plant the grass and sell it.

What I liked in the Tsitsa workshops was that we were treated with respect, especially as an elderly woman. We are comfortable, in the places we sleep, and the food we eat; you feel important. If you mention that you are not feeling well, people always check on you, and take good care of you; we are always treated with respect and care. I really like that.

At first, when they said the dam would be built, we thought of job opportunities. But when they said we would need to move, we were worried. I was uncomfortable to participate; we became part of the enemy in the eyes of our people for associating with the project

Even if we do not agree on a matter, I prefer that a person speak and finish before being interrupted; I do not like it when someone speaks over me. In the Tsitsa project, it is the

English speaking, it makes me uncomfortable; I am unable to fully express myself in the language; I prefer to speak my language

Being called to participate means there is something that people have seen in me; that I can contribute. I often wonder, will I be able to do it? Participation also means gaining something out of what I take part in.

So they could recognise my contribution

To participate means I am recognised as someone who can make a valuable contribution, and as an active person

My first memory of participation was in a choir in Joburg. We travelled, province to province, for competitions. I liked music back then, even wrote my own songs

Coming back to the village, in the local party, I was taught how to work with local people; to find and listen to their needs. I was very active in the community; elected to be a secretary of the branch. I was part of the women's league, was the treasurer; I am still settled there. Volunteering for the branch, the party would see that I was dedicated; I would become a ward committee

Other places where I participated were in the traditional council, as one of the secretaries, and in school, I played netball.

When the Tsitsa project came, I started to make some money, and saw a difference in my life. With the help of the community, and the little money, I could now contribute towards my family needs, and help my husband. One thing that my parents taught me is respect, which I apply in my family

I like to learn, and in the project workshops, I gain a lot of knowledge, that is why I always attend. I remember when we got taught how to budget for our small wages, and how to protect our identities from strangers. I liked that

I am not a person who likes to speak a lot; when I am speaking, maybe saying something that is not correct, someone is talking over me, not listening to what I am saying. That is what I do not like most. I wish they would wait for me, and correct me after

Because my community

First participated in the vetiver grass project
as the community
called by the traditional council
happy to learn about this grass
they told us we can sell the grass
That it could be used to rehabilitate dongas

we accepted it
we were taught how to plant it
We listened carefully
We were happy
selected a committee
I was nominated to lead this project,
We had to find a name
Because it was part of the Tsitsa Project

Things started getting tricky
There was a process
this project is a business
we need money from our own pocket to get there
people were worried to receive less money from the project,
That there would be corruption involved
We communicated and contributed money to travel
with the support of LIMA

I have not participated much in the Tsitsa Project,
I cannot say I have played a role yet
I just know of the dam
we can go sell our things there
only thing that has stopped me from participating
they have asked for people who have driver's licenses only
They only told us that the dam will be built
we will get some jobs from this project

The Tsitsa project was introduced
as a project that will give us water in the community
We were happy with that
the vetiver did not come with Tsitsa Project
LIMA brought it to the community
we would get pipes to water it

I have participated as a regular member in church
I believe in God
you have to be close to God in order to live

In the community
I am someone who is called upon when there is trouble
When they need someone to resolve the conflict
I am someone who likes to contribute in that manner

I attend community meetings to listen
And help where I am needed
helping out in the community is participating
I help by contributing my own money

by attending and listening
find out what the problem is
see what I can contribute
in helping the community

what I like is
seeing the community working together
Supporting, each other and communicating.

When there is something said
that I do not believe in
or is not part of my principle
that is where I don't participate or contribute

Participating means to love, to be valued

My first memory of participation was when I worked in the mines; I was a foreman, and I trained new miners. We contributed money and started a brick-making company, to earn some extra money; we also employed others, to make some money. We were not just workers; we had shares in the mine.

I was very good at working with my hands, so even after retirement from the mines, I like that I could still use the knowledge I had gained to share with people here in the village, so they could also have some skills.

Here at home, the main thing I have been involved in is the local high school, where I was a caretaker for years, then part of the SGB after. I have also been part of the schools being built in this area; even now, I am part of the planning of a new school currently being built.

The first time Rhodes students came to this area, they came to me. There were a lot of them; some were white. I took them the headman. I guided them throughout the forest; Forests were our biggest. Students would also be accompanied into households to do their work. We attended workshops, where we write things down in groups.

They made us understand how water flows down the mountain into the Tsitsa River, how to keep the water in the river clean; even about trees that absorb the water. There

were also meetings on how to prevent pollution of the river, where they taught us about how we could close the dongas with grass that we planted, and that we would also sell the grass to earn some money.

What I expected to gain some knowledge, to add to what I already know; that is what I like and received; it was what I wanted. I like that they bring students to the area; Students arrive almost every year, they help us remember or talk about things;

Participating means to love, to be valued, motivated and being made a better person. Being called to participate means that people value me and my contribution; if that person wants people to participate; it means they like people; I am also motivated to participate, when someone is easy to reach or ask questions.
I also like talking to the people in the community

I showed excellence

I grew up here in the village; studied in the school here, with the intention to become someone some day; I showed excellence in sports, especially soccer; I was also part of the priest association, we used to meet and learn,

I then went to the village high school; I was part of the student church society, even part of the student committees on sport coaching; passed there and left to finish my studies in Gauteng; Even there I showed excellence, was even taken by a professional team into their academy; But because of my studies and pressure from parents, I had to leave sports; I went to College, but I left due to money issues.

I got security training; when I found a tangible job, I didn't take a year doing that job, I was made a leader; I got selected as part of a delegate, I spent 2 years there, then I went back to Gauteng

I left jobs for different reasons, for instance, a friend telling me, *'There is a place that is better than the one you're in, please come and apply'* then I would apply; managed to show excellence, I got selected when others were left behind; I left during a strike, or when I felt my life was in danger

I went to work in another place; I worked for a year and a half; they picked my name to be one of the supervisors; I refused, but management persuaded me; preparing for the new position, I got injured; it was a great opportunity for my development, but I felt uncomfortable with how it happened; so, I decided to quit

In all places where I worked as a supervisor, I took part in meetings when it was about work and workers; I was not embarrassed if they turned me down, that is how we learn; they also came to me for advice, even though I was lower in terms of work positions; things like that one empowered me, and encouraged me even more

When people had a desire for you to thrive, encouraging me to apply for other positions; why don't you explore other opportunities? but then some things required skills that I did not master; telling me to do courses, I could not afford it due to parental obligations, but others would try and try; some guy tried me for a job as a marine soldier, but my age was above the limit, they fixed that issue, there was only one problem, maths and science;

Mostly I stayed in security; I had an interest to grow; security is known for opening the gate and registering names, on my journey what I realised, they empower their workers; when they see your potential, they train you and empower you, they get you into courses; I found myself being like people who were more educated

Most of my family was in Gauteng, even if I went to other places, they were a temporary place for me, in the end I had to go back to Gauteng; until I finally came back home to the village; a place I had just neglected;

When the Tsitsa project came, I was not sure what it was about; when it said we worked with forests and dongas, etc, I thought it was going to arrive, hire that person (CLO); From there, a contract would come, looking for people, then work would commence; I used to think that it was about dongas, soils and trees. Only to realise it was a broad project, too broad;

There were those workshops which taught us the system that it uses, there are researchers, government, and other partners; it's a process, taking a slow pace with implementation; I did not have a proper understanding at first, but as I followed it, I realised that it does those things, but it depends on the funding; when it gets there, that is where it troubles me the most until today

that is the most difficult part about it when you address the people; They don't care about that, all they want to know is how they were left behind; *you work alone, where is this thing of yours that you keep singing to us about? What about us? It was said to be a project, is it your project alone?*

I swear, it is very painful; I went to the headman for permission to undertake a survey, he said go ahead, but know that they will eat you alive; people used to chase me around, I swear, and many hurtful words were said; But those who went to school, they understand, but

majority of the community has problems, and they don't want to talk about the project

It brings me so many problems because there is nothing tangible; it's really hard. It does not give me power; 'if you knew people from this area, it's elderly people, something being said by a child, they would hardly listen to it; But I could try if there was something tangible; I am afraid to go and speak there, what will I say? It should not have been referred to as a project, people here, once they hear 'project', they think of employment

Besides the challenges, there are many things that I learned; I had a subject called Geography in school, I hated it so much; in secondary school, I was taught by my uncle, he would beat me; high school, I got taught by the principal, You see you people who come from university, having done Masters and stuff, he only spoke English, not just simple English, they even called him an American, he did not consider that we lived in rural areas, and were not used to English; Tsitsa project took me back to that thing that used to be a challenge for me in school,

I was taken to a private school by white people to complete my matric; Yoh! I had issues when I got there, because English was something I could only write; but it placed me in a better position to understand English; and had an impact in my ability to speak English; that empowered me to even stand up for myself, and made me become someone; and I got jobs that placed me close to white people;

If you take a child from here and place them in a town school, there is a big difference; you can blame our education, which was the worst one; some of them will have studied in Mthatha college, then come stay in the village, where they never got exposed to people who speak English; it affected their confidence to speak English; that is the disadvantage we have;

The amount of knowledge I got, apart from formal education, was a lot because the project is very broad, it's not just about forests and dongas, but there is more to it, including partners, etc., it does not just come and hire people, the Tsitsa project is different, it deals with issues that are real for this community

Participation, it does not have a single answer actually, when you take part, you learn something new and you teach other people, it's about gaining knowledge, just being there, even if you don't talk, just listen, just be aware of what is happening in your surroundings.

Sometimes it is about numbers that are needed to increase credibility; if we get a certain number of signatures; but, do not just

vote without knowing the details, people came, and spoke about different options, the elderly people were excited, they did not care to find out what it's disadvantages were; if people had knowledge, they would have made a better choice

If I had not gone there, or if we did not talk to each other, because this was discussed in corners there would not have been a change; that influence of talking to each other and showing up for each other,

1:2 Research

My favourite part is meeting new people

Participation to me is, spending your time and attention on something; from being told what needs to be done, to being part of the team; My expectation is that, if an activity is referred to as participatory, communication is not one-directional, and has numerous activities.

In school, I participated in a lot of sport; that was compulsory, being part of a team; my experience was mostly good, I got to hangout with friends on the side… that was the main thing; did not really enjoy practising

In university courses, I found one on social structures quite cool because, it was technical, yet cognisant of social dimensions

I participated in a protest action; it made sense at the time, maybe social pressure as well; but I was motivated to, I was hoping to help; I was just another number saying, *I believed in the cause.* That was informal participation,

I helped with the coordination of one organisation; they worked with the university, organising learning sessions; the organization had a really good idea; was mostly nice just to meet people, I loved the idea space, and the thinking, and the challenging; that was formal participation, not as formal as university courses.

We did a school painting, I was uncomfortable with how it was done; the school wasn't included, and it wasn't done that well; we were all students; we didn't really have time for it.

When I looked back initially, I was like, oh, students are flaky; but now actually reflecting, I'm like, what could we do with no budgets, and no experience? Maybe I just had unrealistic expectations of what we were able to achieve

Open city, trying to promote alternative modes of transport to cars, and social cohesion; I also participated in a development of an activist guideline for water, a low level of participation, I was just invited to take part, I didn't have massive ongoing involvement

Food network, promoting food justice, I participated in their activities for a few years; that's slightly more involved than participation; participation is quite a low level of commitment;
I was drawn into the movement by my interest in food; the people were also inviting, and genuine, and doing important work; I felt okay spending my time doing

I participated in an international conference, that was a high level of participation; Was a bit weird, The local network was down to earth, sort of activist-focused; it was very authentic, and the international conference was a little bit more removed, talking about policy; it didn't map on to what I was interested in, the best thing was meeting international people, who were drawn to it for similar reasons; connecting with them was super special

That was the kind of stuff that I participated in; a bit of a spectrum, sort of very formal things like school and university, with very strict rules of participation; then kind of organizations I got involved with, the binding or the motivating factor was kind of social, like a social contract. Like, *yes, I think this is important, I'm going to help you do this.*

I've been able to choose what I wanted to participate in; which has meant mostly good associations; my negative associations with participation, are things I've been forced to do;

There was a lot of protest action about service delivery, I was interested in it; People just seemed to have no power; I was interested in trying to figure out, what mechanisms were available to get power for them to engage with formal governance; I thought that the Tsitsa project was looking at that

Not sure what I expected, active people filling gullies or something. I found it too severely frustrating; I was a little bit disillusioned by, the nature of the Tsitsa project being a really heavy research project; The fuzzy relationships, very little interaction; different groups doing their own thing; very

disconnected, massive disconnect; I struggled to find a place; I was used to where all work in one office,

In the first workshop, I was pleasantly surprised; the monitors were very keen and engaged; their structured sort of participation was very useful; I initially was thinking of discreet sort of workshop events, not aimless, but not optimal;

I've spend time in the project, I've had to adapt my expectations; to some extent, letting go of some of my idealism, I'm not going to stay here forever, Having done that I'm understanding it, And that makes it easier; I don't have to be as hard on everyone; The whole things is very much an academic exercise, and itis not having a real impact in this space; Maybe I'm expecting too much of it,

the good thing was the CLOs getting experience facilitating; I think the value was marginal to their lives; I think the real value is in the sort of the long-term interactions; I think depth is what will make things stick in people's minds; another variable is the authority, if Spha goes to visit it's maybe not a big deal, but it's like I'm there, maybe Tally is there, you can kind of create depth with special-ness

I enjoy exploring the theories, most importantly, I enjoy my interactions with the people, working on things together; that practical side of it, not the academic aspect

Dishonesty is a source of discomfort for me; people say they are doing things, when they are not; red flags are ignored;

Sometimes, my expectations of others may be a bit unrealistic. I see value in the way things are done in the TP, especially the research side, but I did not quite understand at first.

Everyone is different

Participating in the process of discussion or any forum, falls down to various aspects: The topic would be one, the nature of the person, the space or environment one is in, the facilitator itself, and the methods or approaches used

Participants could sound quite harsh; they point across quite strongly; you gotta be quite confident, to challenge that.

Who is there? *How often do we see ourselves in an environment, populated by these sorts of, hard core strong scientists?* They have lots of experience; it's a little

intimidating atmosphere. The more confident carry their voice; the shy take a while to voice their opinion.

It's also up to the facilitator, making it accessible or not accessible; it's a two-way thing for me, find balance between the participant and the facilitator, and the environment of the facilitation

I'm by nature a shy person; an only child, I'm not sure if that played any role, but I had to find my strategies

Starting from school, I will not be the first person to raise my hand! The methods at the time by the teacher, again, were not accommodating people like me; you learn by yourself, then stand and recite. I didn't enjoy being put on the spot, at all; they were difficult times for me,

I moved to another country; had very little command of the language; that was another factor that just completely deprived me from participating, in class, or with people or with friends

You have to find your own strategies; one is really shy in certain places, but not in others; I would pose my thoughts to, a smaller group or one to one during break or during in leisure time; my voice will carry through into the bigger group, at a later stage

The university, very different teaching style; group work, It just opened an opportunity for me; I found it suitable for my nature.

We did have to do presentations; a combination of being shy, and having to speak in a 2nd language; but when you grow older; you find these spaces a little bit easier

The different styles, there are the ones that allow people to participate better, and the other ones just, more inhibiting

In the TP's internal discussions, most of us have found ourselves in that place; we're able to express ourselves freely; even when we are taking the seat back, we're given enough opportunity

We're also a multi-cultural, and multi-language environment; one doesn't need to be feeling intimidated that what they want to say is not a professionally constructed sentence; any inputs are valid

The intention of hearing priorities, and viewpoints, and inputs was there from the start, but first phase of the project, participation was on the surface from a local point of view, a few members doing local consultations at high level administrative areas,

The culture of participation in this context, some people generally are not allowed, it's culturally not acceptable that certain people speak more than others Or don't speak at all, It's not just about us

Every community has its leaders, people that usually honour the invitation; women, more senior citizens; Men tend to speak more than others, about certain topics. We've seen younger people as well, coming along and being quite vocal

As the person trying to facilitate, be very aware of who the participants are. You might know the context, but not the dynamics; that takes a while you gotta draw on tools and approaches that will give people the opportunity

But generally, I get the sense that, people feel free to participate now; to speak when they want to speak. Our group is quite broad, everyone is able to do their best; there are people that are shy, people that are more holding back; but in one way or another, they have an opportunity to contribute

Even though I don't speak the language, it doesn't really affect me much; I don't remember times that I haven't contributed if I wanted to; It's critical that whoever you're working with, you realign yourselves beforehand; If there is that trust between the facilitator and yourself as a non-local language speaking person, then it can work

You let the control go; you're getting the essence of what's happening. Unless you're now participating as well, I don't feel you need to understand every single word. We don't have the time to ask in the session, you can read people, you also remove yourself from trying to put the message across

COVID restrictions, put us back a bit; I remember when we first started with zoom meetings; that was in itself a challenge, Now you gotta raise your hand, You got, not only think about what you want to say, but you gotta manoeuvre through the interface; We've got a hang of it, and the good facilitators we also have.

I realised, without knowing, what my values were

For me it means, I took part in something where I was allowed to, say respectfully; that what I wanted to say was, either noted down, or acknowledged, or shared as a point of discussion; and that I didn't feel, belittled when I was speaking.

For me, it's about, understanding different values, Being honest, With yourself, And the people you're interacting with; It's about accepting that it won't necessarily Go the way you wanted it to go, That's okay There's an expectation that, We come from the same culture, Therefore You'll have the same values as me, That's not necessarily true

Team sports, kind of compulsory; there were always other people involved. You participated, partly because you had to, but then enjoyed the sport, anyway

The earliest memory of being involved, growing up with other little children; my mom, she was trying to teach us stuff, there were lots of games, playing together; lots of freedom to do what we liked, because we understood the rules

There's a very good chance that the bossiness, and the leadership stuff come from there; it was my house, my mum, my room

I was always involved in like, school plays,
I was convinced that, all I wanted to do, was act and sing…
that didn't work out

An audition, not getting into the dance team; It would seem that, if I wasn't gonna consider having some kind of, odd relationship with, a lecturer level person, I wasn't actually gonna be considered; throw your morals out the window; I had this inner strength, a sense of saying; this doesn't sit comfortably with me.

In high school, the headmasters said to me, if you wanna have any chance, reconsider your friendship with this person; I ignored that, And told him *no!* Subsequently, I got made the head prefect. I wasn'tall that keen; we all had to do that stuff, so they could pick out people

Maybe that was the thing; I actually stood up for myself; that's when I realised, without knowing, what my values were.

Was an exchange student, you're a bit of a novelty, they use you bit like a show horse; *'There's a person with a funny accent comes from this place, you gotta come to this. '*Once they get over the fact that, you speak funny, they just want you to be involved; it probably helped that I was white, and I'm not really shy.

I started working; in that space, it's necessary for it to be hierarchical; you can't get the job done if people do not understand what they need to do. It's not necessarily participatory, not that democratic, it is client driven, completely.

Sci-fest, they had worked together for years, quite set on the ways that they worked, I arrived with, a different way of thinking.

Very often, I speak in a language that most people don't understand; they give that sort of, blank nod, taking notes; you just know, they haven't understood a word. I made it clear that, I was aware; that helped; people started feeling comfortable; It was really nice to know that we all Had each other's backs.

It's so strange how, roles, and the authority that is associated with that role, changes people's perception of who you are, and how you behave; Even if you don't think you've changed, there's almost an expectation that, in a particular role, you'll know, or understand certain things. Suddenly I might be the voice of authority.

Going to these workshops, I picked up observation skills; just from being in spaces where, I did not know the language, which was quite useful, particularly in the Tsitsa area.

If I am in someone else's space, which I always am in the Tsitsa, I need to respect the rules; I might not agree, but I am just a visitor. That's how I like to allow myself to participate.

The 1st science management meeting; very much a space of, technical, top-down, engineer-y, type of people on one side of the room, and everybody else; Seriously different ideas, People that live in the space, don't seem to be featuring.

What was really nice, very often, In those spaces, I was more respected, than, I think, In the reverse situation; in a space where there were more white people than black people, They're not as well respected as I felt in those spaces There's

no acknowledgment that There might be a language barrier, There's almost arrogance to that.

If I had not done workshops before, my expectation might have been that, it would happen more quickly; that change over time, an acknowledgment, even from some the kind of, hard, technical, top-down science people, you can't just parachute in, and just hope; If we allow the space for conversation, you start getting a much better picture; Now I get to participate in everything.

We did a presentation; people went, *'ha, okay, We've heard what you've said, and that made sense;'* that definitely was a highlight. I suppose, recognition in a way, a verbal acknowledgement in spaces like that; academia sometimes drives me nuts, but there are times when you need to have that kind of recognition, in those kinds of spaces.

I certainly have been in meetings, where you feel uncomfortable, because the person running the meeting is almost being like, trying to be kind, but underlying that is, this tension of, *'There are foreign speaking people in our midst.*

In the isiXhosa space, it's almost as though, it's okay to call out a person for being different; *you're white, you're English-speaking, you're female, but it's cool, you can stay in our meeting, but we are not gonna translate.*

And those meetings where, I felt like, *this is rubbish; nothing is going to change; I just spent an hour driving here, I'm bored out of my head; I could be doing 10 other things.*

Conferences feel a bit like that; you've spent like a day, you get to the end like, I haven't been invited in any way, to do anything; you don't feel fulfilled.

I feel good when we all come to a common view

When I was at school, we walked in a wild place; I connected with the earth; from that experience, engaged who ever I met with, into the ideas of people being part of the world.

I started a wildlife society, I began to talk with my peers about it; and the school authority; that was my first participation; the whole school hall, full of people, I stood up and I spoke

I got involved with the water law; There was a very senior man… He just wanted to, push social justice forward, fiercely; we ended up with two separate laws; that didn't help with anything; This deep learning of how easy it is to derail a common purpose, if you don't keep the purpose together

It was at that point, that, my vision shifted, from using participation to protect the environment, to realising that, to live, In a constructive relationship with the world; If we did not have respectful relationships with each other, what you're left with, is just activism; activism is important; but to make stuff happen, you have to be an activist and an advocate

It has been out of my own experiences that, I have latched onto those ideas of power relations; to make them part of the way I work; I suddenly realised, it had emerged out of, a power imbalance between, myself and the other person, because even though I was an adult, the relationship carried an inherent power imbalance;

I feel good when we all come to a common view; I was a deeply shy person; I could always stand on a stage and talk, but found individual interactions and social spaces extremely difficult; If I could persuade someone to see that common vision, it was the entry point for human connection with me;

I have a deeply experience of, not being able to persuade people; the water laws, I failed; that failure is an emotional experience for me because, it was so important for me not to fail at that.

You could say we have done nothing, except, show this deep inequity of participation; we needed to leave behind people who were empowered to act in a governance space; now we have the CLOs, who are that interface, but they are tied into the period of the project; when we stop paying them, they won't do it; we're exactly back where we started.

After the first workshop, Tom said to me, *you come in, speaking English, and taking from people;* That drove the shift from English translated into isiXhosa, To the other way around; huge learning experience for me, I sat in a meeting that I didn't understand, I was excluded, I got bored so that my concentration wandered, I felt, what the hell am I doing for all these hours?

All of a sudden I, up to that moment, I would not have said, I was exercising power over people; I would have thought I

was being sensitive and helpful? But in fact, what I was doing was, running it the way I knew how to run it.

I love it, when you see people engaged in those workshops, I get a warm fuzzy feeling about it; when we've gone into reflection, people have voiced their discomforts, and someone says, *but did you notice some of the less good things?* that I had filtered out with the warm and fuzzy everything together; even though that is quite a big driver, the feedback that it's going well, I really value the voices that are more critical.

Your question allowed me to acknowledge a discomfort that I had covered up; that was the recognition that people hadn't actually understood, I knew; you know if you see an older person, and you treat them respectfully; you know when they walk away without a deep understanding, you know; But I didn't flag that as a critical thing to address, because it was too uncomfortable; Until you came and gave it a language.

I have, DEEP feelings of satisfaction out of contributing good things; Tsitsa has been a hard task place for me, I was there at the beginning of it, I had a vision; it has been the process of, learning, while letting go, trying not to push so much; participation must be as enabling, not as dominating.

My experience of participation in Tsitsa, it's been walking in a very vulnerable, open way; It's been both very rewarding and very scary, And very hurtful, but VERY INTENSE; It's an emotional space for me, the hardest and most raw, real engagement that I have been part of; has required that I engage with my whole person, physically, emotionally, intellectually; it has drawn out from me, that response

The idea of complexity allows me to understand and Find a place for what has happened; some of it has been hard and difficult, and I have done it.

The passionate, absolute confidence of when I was 16, of converting the world, to this important thing, to recognising how important it is to, to respect your catalytic capacity, I'm good at having the idea, and making it happen.

The team that we have is better at uncovering diversity and allowing it to come out than I ever was; it's been hard for me to let go of controlling, respecting the process more; being willing to step back and watch something else unfold, has

been the hardest lesson of participation for me; I don't even know if I do it very well.

The highlights for me have actually been, going into those spaces, and then watching how, the idea that you would start from, something everybody knew, and the sense in that room; I had the sense that people were relaxed and present, and experienced more freedom; and I wasn't talking at people; how that change in practice, changed participation; that experience has been what has had me let go.

When we managed to have everyone there, that had been a big high point; but it was a different high point from the experience of being part of people really participating.

The discomforts have been anything that made me feel excluded; not being allowed to contribute into the ideas anymore, feeling threatened by vulnerability.

It's been difficult to experience the consequences of my personality, Molly leaving; she was gone; why had she not been able to talk to me? How bad had my behaviour been? I was left with this huge emotional void; it was the biggest failure moment for me.

That when we participate, the only people not being paid for their time, are the people who give us the data; it drives me crazy, it is instinctively exploitative; If there was one policy brief I want to write, it would be that one.

If you had asked me at the beginning, the only real outcome would be if there was somebody who, out of the Tsitsa, ends up as a person with a personal mission to make participation happen; if we left behind any seed of agency in any of the people; If we leave with government, any level of government, more willing to create spaces that would enable that.

I think our work is fundamental and hard; I find it much easier to talk about the nice things, about watching people doing restoration, you watch it unfold and it looks positive.

I wanted to be friends. the relationships were deeply related to being able to create personal relationships with people who shared a vision, who I would then persuade to do all sorts of things they may not otherwise thought they would do.

if I encountered some who didn't, there was a push back, it was like petrol in the engine I would listen to their language carefully, and listen to their view, and I would argue my perspective into their perspective using their language, so I would advocate, I would be persuasive, I would turn myself inside out to draw people into the kind of shared vision.

In becoming personally engaged with people, I was also vulnerable. So the enthusiasm on the shared vision creates a vulnerability, and there were people who took advantage of that, and I was quite badly hurt by that.

I met people who introduced to TD as a word and a concept …um, I then worked for the NRF, and the idea of complexity was added into that, and I began to align my intellectual academic work with my advocacy work.

So for me there is a deep connection between my emotional experience, my intellectual growth and the way I work, and practice. So as I read intellectually, about transdisciplinarity and complexity, it all made sense to me because it allowed me to explain to myself the person I am and how I work, it wasn't just an idea, it allowed me to make sense of my own self. So participation engagement is a foundational living path for me, it the way I learn.

So participation and engagement and learning by doing is how I live, and that feedback has been the driver, the shorter answer is this conscious feedback of how I experience the person I am engaging with.

that took me into the community of practice of research and I began to participate. So my whole way of working in my life has been networked, has been engaged actively with people looking for all the time where my experience and their experience together could take something forward.

I got involved with the water law, this whole vision of what participation could do. and in a very broad way realising that connection with people, and listening and writing could make stuff happen, and it was at that point that my vision shifted from using participation to make sure we protected the environment, to realising that if you did not connect with people where they were…this deep learning that … taking people with you, of how easy it is to derail a common purpose if you don't keep the purpose together and learning this broader idea of participating in ways that worked towards doing things together

for me the story is this deep need for people to live in a constructive relationship with the world and the emerging that if we did not have respectful relationships with each other, and that if the human relationship was not intact, what you're left with is just activism. but for me I wanted to have partnerships that the chance of building stuff.

Empty vessels make a lot of noise

As a child, I grew up as a very kept to myself kind of person; never involved myself in anything to do with talking; It was easier, Not because there were no spaces to participate, I chose not to.

You're so scared that you're going say something stupid? Or something that's not good enough? I'm just going to shut up, So I'm safe I don't want to look like an idiot I'm just going to look like someone who doesn't know anything.

Playing; that type of participation is, is easy for me; you don't talk much, you just show what you can do, be part of a team; that is my first memory f what I consider participation.

Sports; big way that you feel like you're participating; every person has a role to play; you feel honoured even if you're sitting on the bench, Somehow, you're still a participant; you're all working towards the same goal.

Attending courses,it's a space where you can almost equally participate; but the equality depends on your confidence, people who talk in these spaces are the most confident.

My first Tsitsa project meeting, I remember thinking *'I have no idea what these people are talking about; I have no idea why I am in this meeting;'* I was just there, no participation; not that it wasn't allowed, it wasn't the right time or the platform.

I WAS JUST THERE, NO PARTICIPATION
I had to get used to so many, so many white people; I was like, *'What the hell?'* I'm missing half of the stuff he's saying, he talks a lot, and talks fast.

SLOWLY, I STARTED TO HAVE A VOICE
My participation, really talking and contributing, was within the project; that was after a while, two years or so; slowly, I started to have a voice, and participate, feel like my input is valuable; now I know that I can participate.

Sometimes there's like, other people that are like, Overpowering; it's not intentional sometimes, Spaces where there's no space for other people to engage; when you say your idea, they listen to you, but they're just like, '*Okay, but',* then just move on to another.

Most places where I felt like I'm not participating, nobody responded; no one even acknowledging who you are; I feel like In those instances, people are like, silently selecting who participates, and who doesn't, according to your importance and relevance in that that space.

I CHOOSE WHAT TO PARTICIPATE IN
At this age, I don't participate for the sake of it, my morals won't let me; I choose what to participate in, if I feel like I'm going to make a difference, whether you hear me or use my input, but there's a chance that it could make a difference; That's my motivation, it has to have a purpose.

And when not to; I don't like talking when you feel like you're going to be judged; I get offended easily, I don't like bullies, people that just always want to be right, always want to take charge of the space; when people are too competitive, and, cheating.

My teacher would shout *empty vessels make a lot of noise;* I was like*, what is this woman talking about?* Now that I'm older, it makes sense; most smart people don't talk much, but, when they do talk, You're surprised, So, I don't talk, I just I do!

Be very organized, up your game Show up when you're needed, that's how I survived. I'm a firstborn; naturally I've just learned to take charge, when no one is

The TP brings everybody together; we push each other, that support structure, People rooting for you, It's easy to be the true…To reach your potential, or even build towards it, open up.

The responsibilities, being given things to do that are mine; your role, only you know, suddenly the only one who could answer; had to sit up and listen; being trusted with things, now you suddenly feel like Oh, I'm listened to.

You build confidence over time; you've acquired the knowledge, from within, also from the space; the confidence that I have, I can't lie and say I came with it; it grew as I was

part of the project; Learning the different, mannerisms, how to behave in certain spaces, can't be the standard myself everywhere.

We underestimate the power of shared spaces; learning from each other, Connections that have grown, engaging people you'd have not engaged on a normal day; you feel like, I have a chance to be influential somehow, like communities are not shut out, completely.

My role involves a lot of talking, being up to date, building networks, and building relationships; not so difficult in person, it's nice to interact, especially, if you meet new people; Now that everything's online, you lose concentration easily.

1:3. Government

It's a team effort

For participation to take place, there needs to be other people involved; where one lays their views, and they are listened to; one needs to be able to say, I have a contribution in that thing

I remember working in a plantation, unlike a car garage, which is safe by just locking the doors; a plantation requires the involvement of other parties; one can't do it alone
Or In a rugby field, you can't score alone; the enabler is team effort, the participation of others

In rugby field or a cricket field, we're also participating as spectators; sharing views, no, he's supposed to be doing it that way; I do not know these people, but at the end of the day, we want something common.

Participation: you are looking for information, which you do not currently have; you create some space, an environment conducive for you to get what you want.

The most fundamental motivation for me is, does it meet up with my values? To catch my attention, topics around nature and natural resources, anything that seeks to develop other people. I want my name to be remembered positively, not negatively

A rigid facilitator, one who is not open to different views; it is either this way or the highway. Where time is wasted, losing focus of the topic at hand, and derailing to other casual ones

or totally unrelated to the purpose; those are the red flags for me.

In the TP, they invited me to their launch; they listened to my idea, I knew the area better than them, my team had already started doing some work; the research aspect, I had a contribution; decisions could not just be taken from just looking; making local people the critical aspect, and the name change;

If I look at years back when you (Rhodes) came in, how suddenly, things changed; not changing to the bad, changing for the better; that is how participation is, it's to make the load easy; it was hard do in the initial stages, change is not easy, but accepting it and going with it.

In my workplace, participation is based on the values of, Batho-Pele (people first), then people-centric; viewing a person as a person, listening to that person.

There would be a time where you disappear, be proactive; it's like a relay, when I run on my hundred meters, I need to give you this baton in a proper way so that you can run your mile; we know our goal; it's a team effort.

1:4. Implementing agent

Everyone's views are important

Systems are like a machine or an engine; you got your pistons, you got your cylinders; the petrol that goes into the cylinder is ignited, and start moving your pistons, and start driving; there are a number of different moving parts, to achieve a certain goal; that's what participation is.

Sports and societies, nice releases from studying, being active and having fun, made me feel like part of the large university community; an opportunity to learn new things, I met some cool people, and created networks that might not have been possible without those opportunities.

I have a very unlikely best friend, quite different from me in style, but we connected through one of the university activities that we participated in together.

Like a piece of the puzzle or a link in a chain, forming part of the bigger narrative; inclusive of every partner, some may not be that active. I like the opportunity to report and get expert advice that I can trust, learning from experienced

people is a huge advantage; many opportunities are shared, those kinds of relationships are important.

An important feature as well in a participatory system, even if they belong to a similar group, their perspectives about their environment are not homogenous; grass, one might view it as food for their animals, another sees thatching material for their house.

How do you maintain effective participation? You can't always make everyone happy; some people will not get what they want. But everyone's views are important; we tend to forget about certain groups of people. But if a decision had to be made, make it a point to explain why the decision was better over the other one.

Sometimes people are overlooked and ignored; at school for me, I feel like I participated; I was one of those nerdy music kids; I believe that I contributed quite a lot, to the school and all of the activities; I played sport. But I felt like those nerdy kids were overlooked, nerdy kids like me overlooked; weren't seen as or weren't considered for leadership positions, I almost didn't want to buy into the system, because I knew that I was going to be overlooked by the system anyways. I never applied for any leadership positions.

Context plays a huge part in the effectiveness of participation; other people refuse or are uncomfortable to work with the traditional leadership because, nepotism. They prefer political leadership, ward councillors change after 5 years, new relationships need to be built with new person. There maybe are places where that kind of political system works; it might not work in the rural contexts that they work.

When considering people's lives within their environment is not done effectively, that is tokenistic, like placing an advert about stakeholder consultation in a newspaper that is not highly read; then nobody shows up. But they did their job; they ticked that box. But effort is needed, to nurture relationships, and trust.

Agriculture is life

When you say sports, sports is me; as a young boy you play football, whether you're good or bad, no one is going to judge you; I was not that good, there is a certain level when you realise, no, I'm not a player; to make things worse, we were 4 friends, all three of them were so good.

I'm good at coaching; as we speak, I run a soccer team; I also assist a ladies' netball team, though I am not hands-on, it is a girl's thing; I sponsor them out of love,
One thing I hate in sports is fighting; a coach fighting with other coaches, and the referees, they are very poor, very poor, and poor referees.
They interfere with the results; it gets frustrating for the young players, who train hard, only to be let down by an individual.

When we were growing up, we didn't get the exposure; recruiters, there's no way they're going to drive on this type of a road. I saw talent, a lot of talent in the rural areas that just went under the grave; I'm trying to change that; if you get better coaching at an early age, you can do it; that's why I needed to groom young people.

I conducted a lot of trainings with farmers, both young and old; People are starting to realise the benefits of agriculture, In Xhosa we say, ubomi, meaning, agriculture is life.

It's challenging to work with old people; some of them take time to understand; they are going to say, *No, we're used to doing this, we never failed.* Not considering things like climate change; the training that I was doing was more practical, that's what you want in the rural areas, and they want to see.

It was good to see the youth, they don't want agriculture, and they associate agriculture with old people; Growing up with utata as a farmer did influence my career decision, I did agriculture. One day I was going to be a farm owner; we've got the land in the rural areas; It's good when you practice what you preach; that was the most memorable thing.

The issue of water is a big one, I am worried about time, we may not have enough time to Achieve the long-term goals; As I said, it's not easy to deal with old people, It takes a lot of time to change their perception; I wonder if the funder is on the same page, whether they realise that it takes time.

When you start a new project, first of all you need to understand it; there can be any documentation in the world, but come to the practical part of things; the Tsitsa project is getting more interesting, I can see the goal and the mission of the project; it aims to leave the land in good health.

When they said working on dongas, my expectation was that, I was going to see bulldozers. I did not realise that no, the

bulldozer would only going to fix now; what is going to happen tomorrow? I saw value in the research that was done.

Established a livestock association, it sparked a lot of interest among the community; It comes with benefits for both the people and the land, people are excited to see their livestock in good condition, because when I grew up, we had something called udobobokasi, (rotational grazing) It was something that worked very well for ubenkolobethu (our elders).

I feel like the Tsitsa project was heading in the right direction, even though it is challenging, the benefits outweigh the challenges and the community was happy to see progress but then covid-19 happened, and affected the progress.

What works in the Tsitsa project is, those workshops that we conducted, People were happy to see their houses on the map; they also feel special; you have their attention; it's a pity that I judge myself, But I think it helps to have someone based in the catchment, who speaks the local language People are able to share They are comfortable to speak.

And having the CLOs, who are the face as well as a the bridge; the regular interaction has led to learning about the interests of the communities; It seems people like Agriculture, That is why we are starting to be establish the associations So they are able to listen.

Participation itself talks to a lot of things; in order for people to participate, they need to be properly coordinated and engaged; coordination is how you put everything together, we do it so well in the Tsitsa project; Engagement is about bringing people in, and explaining what is expected of them; without clear information, people will not participate; Process is labelled as belonging to someone else.

I want to emphasise the fact that working in the Tsitsa project improved both my communication and engagement skills; I did not work so closely with communities before, I realise that trainings are about teaching, while workshops are about sharing skills.

Appendix 3.2: Codebook

Residents

1. **Hope (framing)**

-Betterment - self, family, community through opportunities, skills sharing (framing)
-Frustration - lack of funds and support leading to failure, contextual factors, expectation vs reality (experience)
-Conflict- 'we fought for service delivery' we fought amongst ourselves' (experience)
-Interest formed a huge motivation/drive for his participation.

2. **participation is active, meaningful** – genuine participation = influence decision-making (framing)

-credibility (tokenism) vs epistemic authority (of the 'white' and 'educated' researchers) - 'Being shrugged off' (experience)
-equal contribution = equal compensation-fairness (framing)

3. Learning and sharing knowledge (reciprocity)- transformation (framing)
4. (experience)
5. Loyalty (experience)
6. Other's perception of you/ validation/recognition (experience and framing)

2. I have FOMO

leadership / power / ambassador / link (experience)
epistemic authority (related to age, for this participant as well) (experience)
reciprocity – all have something to contribute (framing)
being listened to and seen (experience)
confidence – "**I feel more confident because you can see me, you can read me**" / 'I misjudge myself' (experience)
learning and gaining experience, 'curiosity' (framing)
being forced (experience)
spaces where I am allowed, spaces where I am allowed/included but not heard, spaces where I am listened to; dismissal - "talk over me" (experiences)

3. Enjoy working with people

1. being part of the discussion – active – contributing ideas and experiences (framing)
2. reciprocal – 'we exchanged ideas and experiences' (framing)
3. enjoyment – enjoys working with people / in groups (experience)
4. interest (framing)
5. positive change (link to hope) – link to "progress" (framing)
6. exposure to new skills / ideas / experiences à "they open your mind' (experience)

7. initial confusion – as part of experience (experience)
8. prior experience of frustration but still holding onto hope (experience)
9. taking knowledge back to community to create awareness (framing)
10. "The one thing **I do not like is being treated like a child**, where assumptions are made without asking me, or mistakes of individuals being generalised" – connection to previous participant's dismissal for age – gender à youth à credibility (generalisation – based on group membership?) (experience)

4. That first secretary position gave me experience

1. self-doubt v self-trust/confidence (experience)(framing)
2. recognition from outside of having something to contribute – boosting confidence – 'they saw something in me' – being seen – (experience)
3. gaining understanding, experience and knowledge (experience)
4. frustration/discomfort – language – felt inability to express thoughts/ideas and so to actively contribute (experience) (conversely translates to the framing of participation as having the confidence to express oneself fluently
5. fear of "doing this in front of white people" (Link to epistemic authority) (experience)
6. being treated with respect and care, feeling important – "I do not like it when someone speaks over me" (framing)
7. opportunities for growth vs "[becoming] **the enemy in the eyes of our people** for associating with the project" – us v them? (experience)
8. "As an elderly woman" – age/gender and their relationship with respect coming up again. (framing and experience)

5. So they could recognise my contribution

1. active – making a contribution – dedication (framing)
2. working with people (framing)
3. listening to people's concerns and needs (framing)
4. "Talking over me, not listening to what I am saying" – disrespect – **"I wish they would wait for me**" – not interrupting or dismissing (experience/framing)
5. learning, gaining knowledge (framing)
6. evidence of reciprocity – learning for self and others (experience/framing)
7. fear of being dismissed/not listened to/making a mistake (experience)

6. Because my community

1. learning 'happy to learn' but confusion (experience)
2. **"we were told" à "we listened carefully" à "we accepted it" à "we were taught**" (experience/framing)
3. frustration – money (framing)

4. opportunity (also linked to the frustration)
5. contribution = conflict resolution and provision of money in the community – positioned in one of status in the community – likes to 'help' his community (framing)
6. self-esteem from status and helping (even being called upon to help) (framing)
7. highlights the importance of community throughout
8. motivated by religion (framing)

7. Participating means to love, to be valued

1. gain knowledge and share with others in the community – he passes this knowledge on / is an agent of knowledge (an epistemic agent) (framing/experience)
    a. **but still seems to talk about knowledge coming in from outside *"they* made us understand" / "*they* taught us" before being passed on**
2. students – outsiders - "some were white" – "they help us remember or talk about things" (experience)
3. to love/be loved/to value/be valued (framing)
4. motivated or dedicated when he feels he has access to the project and team (framing)
5. "being called to participate means that people value me and my contribution" – external validation coming across again – credibility gained from outside (framing)

8. I showed excellence (I would focus on the idea of being left behind "others/they were left behind"

1. empowerment through education, recognition (being asked for advice), and validation but powerless when taking this knowledge back into the community (link to enemy of the people - they were 'left behind', didn't understand) – also link to "I got selected when **others were left behind**" – interesting re framing of wat participation means – not everyone can participate? (experience)
2. concern with tokenism – failure to exchange (
3. resilience tied to gaining knowledge (experience)
4. language – frustrations & fear vs confidence and power (experience)
5. change requires collaboration (framing)
6. participation as reciprocal – "you learn something new and you teach other people" (framing)
7. age and epistemic authority/credibility – "something being said by a child, they would hardly listen to it" (experience)

Note: whiteness as associated with expertise, progress, change, betterment

Research: more theoretical lenses

1. My favourite part is meeting new people (Tom – white male: connection/disconnection)

1. participation = bi-directional à link to reciprocity and mutuality, connecting with people with similar interests and goals, ongoing involvement and commitment required for genuine participation (framing)
2. hope – related to involvement in activism – "I was hoping to help" (framing)
3. hope related to helping also relates to what we were calling the saviour complex – **"I'm going to help you do this"** / "People just seemed to have no power" – link to authority associated with whiteness – e.g., mention of his and Tally's 'special-ness' – "you can kind of create depth with special-ness" (framing)
4. frustration/disillusionment/disconnection – unrealistic expectations/idealism – having vs not having an impact (experience)
5. gaining ideas and knowledge – "I loved the idea space, and the thinking and the challenging" – in light of point 1 – this is probably about sharing and exchange of ideas and experiences (framing)
6. choice v force (positive and negative associations with participation) (experience)
7. huge difference to participants – helper/empowerer vs helped/empowered framing)
8. interest – being interested (framing)

2. Everyone is different (Louisa) – **"find balance"**

1. confidence v intimidation - "the more confident carry their voice" (framing)
2. two-way street – reciprocity / mutuality – finding a "balance" (framing)
3. facilitator as responsible for finding the balance, creating a disinhibiting space, "giving people the opportunity" to contribute framing)
4. again, negative association with participation = "being put on the spot" / **"my voice will carry through into the bigger group, at a later stage" (experience)**
5. acknowledgment that language barriers can prevent participation/contributions (experience)
6. intentions v reality – intending to listen v shallow engagement (experience)
7. assumption: "we're able to express ourselves freely", "one doesn't need to be feeling intimidated that what they want to say is not a professionally constructed sentence; any inputs are valid", "I get the sense that people feel free to participate now; to speak when they want to speak" – this assumption stands in juxtaposition with some of the lived experiences described by the community participants (experience)
8. interesting lived experience of her own participation in the TP: "Even though I don't speak the language, it doesn't really affect me much; I don't remember times that I haven't contributed if I wanted to" (experience)

11. Kathy: I realised without knowing, what my values were

1. understanding different values and rules in the context you're moving into – **"I am just a visitor"-** understanding context and rules comes with more freedom (framing/experience)

2. participation = democratic – all should be heard – “we’ve heard what you said” – recognition/acknowledgement, respected/not belittled when speaking – “If we allow the space for conversation, you start getting a much better picture.”(framing)
3. authority that comes with certain roles – changing perceptions from others as one’s role changes - providing more or less credibility – “Suddenly I might be the voice of authority” – shifting roles up the hierarchy = more credence given – more epistemic authority (experience)
4. ‘we all had each other’s backs’ – safety/comfort/confidence (experience)
5. tension relating to her whiteness/outsider-ness – feels more respected than a black person would in a majority white space, but also kind of just tolerated (experience)
6. hope – “you can’t just parachute in and just hope” relates to 2nd stanza – it won’t necessarily go the way you want it to go – participation should be democratic but she doesn’t see that on the ground – “People that live in the space, don’t seem to be featuring” (framing)
7. Race (language) as assisting/preventing one from moving into different spaces – being able to adapt to different sets of rules, etc. – navigating different spaces – depends on context – learning/acquiring skills (e.g., observation) (experience)
8. Occupied space- people set in their ways- (experience)
9. Knowing your values- standing up for yourself (experience)
10. Time wasted- not being engaged in any way is a waste of time and leads to boredom (experience/ framing)

12. I feel good when we all come to a common view - revelatory

1. successful participation = empowerment / agency - “we needed to leave behind people who were empowered to act” (framing)
2. frustration and disappointment – failure – exploitation (experience)
3. experience of shift in understanding of participation, and facilitation of spaces – relating to language and authority – letting go of control led to greater participation – respecting the process – “I wasn’t talking at people; **that change in practice, changed participation” (experience)**
4. talking at people vs talking with people – respect/” human connection” v tokenism (framing)
5. exclusion/vulnerability/threat – “not being allowed to contribute into the ideas anymore, feeling threatened by vulnerability” – exclusion also related to boredom (link to 11’s experience of boredom when she didn’t understand the language, when the tables were turned) – relation to trust (process/team) to assuage this vulnerability – power and trust (experience)
6. gaining understanding through acquiring a new language – closing a gap in her hermeneutical landscape – the language of epistemic (in)justice – **“you came and gave it a language” (experience)**

7. exploitation / acknowledging that people don't actually understand – tokenism (experience)
8. deeply reflective narrative acknowledging mistakes, failures, questioning her own epistemic authority, enjoying critical voices (experience)
9. the purpose of participation – goals diverging can derail the process – difference can derail – her focus has shifted to bringing about "a common view" – "if we did not have respectful relationships with each other, what you're left with is just activism; activism is important, but to make stuff happen, you have to be an activist and an advocate" (framing)
10. complexity – recognising her own place in the process and in a team (experience)
11. participation must be enabling not dominating (Framing)
12. shift – "If you had asked me at the beginning… if we left behind any seed of agency" doesn't seem to acknowledge the agency already there – starts off with saviour complex and then this shifts – to seeing the agency in the others (experience)
13. reflexivity and shifting her own style of being in the world (framing/experience)

13. 'Empty vessels make a lot of noise'

1. choice in participation – she chooses when she thinks she can / will make a difference / when she has a purpose / when she is listened to respectfully (framing)
2. getting used to white people – initially their presence contributes to her fear (experience)
3. shift from fear to confidence (experience)
4. tokenism - negative association with participation – "**spaces where there's no space" –** not having a voice, being silenced, or dismissed (experience)
5. TP as a positive experience of participation – open up, reach your potential, being part of a team with a common purpose (experience)
6. "the power of shared spaces" – making connections (framing)
7. NB: **"Slowly, I started to have a voice" (experience)**
8. being given responsibilities/trusted with particular roles contributed to her coming out of her shell – to have a voice – recognition and acknowledgement and credibility assigned to her – (experience)
9. people having your back – people rooting for you – support – shift from safety in silence to safety in the group – feeling like you won't be judged à confidence in self (experience)
10. being made to feel like "an empty vessel" that just makes noise – self-doubt – wondering whether she has anything useful to contribute or important to say (experience)
11. empowerment – her narrative strikes me more as a community participant rather than a researcher – she doesn't enter with the authority of the other researchers, but

gains authority in her role – "**every person has a role to play**" à "now you suddenly feel like, Oh, I'm listened to" (experience)

12. her language also speaks directly to empowerment – "**I choose" (framing)**
13. (nice connections to 2 – everyone is different) (framing)
14. finding your place in a space that is already occupied – navigating occupied spaces – "the power of shared spaces" (Framing?)

Implementing agents:

1. Everyone's views are important

1. inclusivity vs marginalisation – positive v negative participation – marginalisation from the knowledge production process – systematic – "we tend to forget about certain groups of people", "sometimes people are overlooked or ignored" (experience)
2. inclusivity, piece of a puzzle, made up of different parts to give a whole – creating networks (framing)
3. finding a place in the space – during COVID-19 – teams had to be trusted – relationships deepened (experience)
4. frustrations: (experiences)
    a. entering and navigating an occupied space, no space for new ideas
    b. being shut down
    c. power dynamics – more power, contribution more highly valued – and the less powerful are uncomfortable to speak
    d. creating spaces for less powerful voices to be heard
5. fear of tokenism (experience)
    a. ticking boxes in recruitment of participants
    b. failure to understand context – both the above and who to work with (i.e., traditional leaders or ward councillors)
    c. finding ways to balance and include all voices

2. Agriculture is life

1. hope – progress v frustration – progress affected (experience)
2. language – enabling people to be comfortable and share (experience)
3. participatory spaces should be ones in which sharing occurs – reciprocity – learning about the interests and needs of the community itself – bringing people in as opposed to 'parachuting in' (framing)
4. improved skills/shift (experience)
5. perception of self as a mentor for the youth (framing)

Government officials:

1. It’s a team effort
    1. positive participation = collaborative, everyone has a voice, and contributes, are heard, people-centric “viewing a person as a person, listening to that person’ (framing)
    2. negative – rigid facilitator is not open to different views and ways of doing things (framing)
    3. acknowledgement of his epistemic authority – “I had a contribution” (experience?)
    4. space – the creation of a space in order to access knowledge of others (framing)
    5. progress – changing for the better – “when you came in how suddenly things changed” (experience)
    6. wanting the same thing – a common goal/purpose – nb for connecting people together (framing)
    7. participation as a team effort (framing)
        a. you can’t do it alone
        b. “make[s] the load easy”
        c. needing to hand over in the proper way – the baton image – everyone has their role to play – “I need to give you this baton in a proper way so that you can run your mile” – Your empowerment requires my contribution
2. Must be inclusive not rubber stamping
    1. Inclusive and collaborative_ representative and give voice- needs thoughtful curating -equality of opportunity for voice and be heard- (framing)
        a. power dynamics-because of status and power and influence and personal politics- diversity and teamwork and relationships- human connection- (framing/experience)
    2. Takes time-allow that process to unfold- to avoid rubber stamping or tokenism-tokenism still dominating much of government's participation practices-maybe it's a time thing, (framing)
    3. Hope and possibility (need for positive change)-contributing to something -hope? - shared understanding- hoping for change out of your participation- not fixed-building something-satisfaction (special feeling) the way she always thought was impactful-do things differently (framing)
    4. Context _ learning from previous experience and adapting- ignorance let to possible insult and disrespect for others in context. í didn't allow the process to unfold as it needed to.' again, context, and learning hard lessons from context (ignorance based on one's identity)-making assumptions-clearly defined boundaries (rules) as enabling- there are kind of rules of the game. And those rules change and differ from context to context. (experience)

Appendix 5.1: Reflecting on my experiences of data collection during the pandemic

When the application for ethical clearance was made in February 2020, the plan was to conduct the narrative interviews in a face-to-face setting. However, the Covid-19 pandemic hit before it was approved, and in May 2020, the university ethics committee gave us the opportunity to amend our methods from face-to-face to online. The process entailed writing a letter to the Institutional Ethics Coordinator briefly stating the approved data collection methods, and how they were going to be replaced by the virtual methods, including the recruitment procedure and how informed consent negotiations with participants might change given the new circumstances. This letter was sent in August 2020, and was approved pending gatekeeper's letters at the end of August. The gatekeepers' letters were all signed and returned by 30th November 2020, and final approval was granted on the same day by the ethics coordinator.

Some conversations had already begun, asking people to participate in the research during the time we waited for the gatekeepers to sign and return the letters. Pilot interviews were also done with the translator in order to prepare her for the actual interviews, and to see if the questions worked in reality as opposed to in theory. Another pilot interview was done with a friend who is not in academia, as a way to test how the questions would work with non-academic members of the research sample. Eleven narrative interviews were held via Zoom between December 2020 and February 2021. In June when movement was allowed, six interviews were conducted face-to-face with participants whose network completely inhibited Zoom calls; all were local residents. Covid-19 protocols were observed during all the face-to-face interviews. Masks covered our mouths and noses, and a safe distance was maintained between us at all times.

In the beginning, I remember feeling very stressed by the fact that I was going to miss out on important facial expressions in the online interviews. I was terrified that I had to learn how to use Zoom and be confident enough with it to not make my participants nervous. I felt so much fear; fear of how losing the personal interaction would affect the quality of the narratives I wanted to gather; of how I could still be sure that the confidentiality I had promised them would be kept in an online study; the list goes on. I knew that some participants were going to struggle with the use of technology, and that this could influence how much they would be able or willing to share with me.

However, after attending a few meetings via Zoom, and reading about the usefulness of the application, I felt confident and became excited to begin my data collection. However, when data collection started, I struggled to get certain people to respond to my invitations. The confusion as to why people did not respond to my requests to become participants in the study, the blue ticks on WhatsApp… I was never sure of whether I should follow-up in a day or a week, or whether to call or send an email or another WhatsApp. I realised, however, that participating in a research study was probably not a priority as people were busy trying to figure out ways to put food on the table when so many had lost their jobs.

As if that was not enough, after the Christmas holidays, people started dealing with loved ones being infected by the corona virus, while others dealt with death on a regular basis in their communities. I felt conflicted between pausing data collection until participants were emotionally ready, and continuing because I was working on a time frame to finish my PhD. I felt conflicted about calling them about work; I worried that it might be a bit insensitive but also thought that it could be a way to forget about the misery by remembering their participation journeys.

For some people interviewed on Zoom, we could not open our videos, which, as already suggested, meant a loss of part of the personal connection between the participants and me. The network was so bad in some areas that participants would have to walk around their area trying to find a better signal. Our frustration at losing the flow of the narrative due to network cuts, and the hurry in some people's voices as they tried to finish speaking before the network broke again was significant. A few people spoke to me for a really short time because they were double-booked. This, I believe, was due to not taking working online as seriously as face-to-face interactions. In these cases, I got limited information from the interview. I also lost some participants who had initially agreed to take part, but later just completely stopped responding to both my calls and texts. Some of the people who were interviewed face-to-face replaced those I had lost during this time. One of the interviews that we conducted was not very useful at all as it seemed as though the poor network quality completely distracted the participant, who was a resident but was not hired by the TP, and had not really gone through the training.

I realised through my data collection during the Covid-19 pandemic that the context I was working in was not ready to work remotely, and that historical injustices still continue in South

Africa. Services are not equally provided. Indeed, the former homelands still lack some basic services.