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Community participation in the management of protected areas: exploring the challenges faced by marginalised rural communities in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Community participation in protected areas management is one of the indices to engender justice and ensure that the needs of local communities are met. However, research suggests that in many protected areas, participation is devoid of equity and justice – and consequently, many rural communities remain on the margins of development. Against this background, this study explores the participation challenges faced by communities in Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve, Eastern Cape. The research objectives were 1) to examine the nature and dynamics of participation in the management of protected areas in the Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve and its adjacent communities and 2) to explore challenges faced by local communities in participation in the management of protected areas. The study was qualitative in nature to allow the researcher to communicate with the participants and take part in the conversations during primary research. Data was collected from four villages through focus group discussions consisting of $n=8$ per each village resulting in $N=32$ participants. Four leaders and one manager from Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve participated in the interviews. The research found that the concept of participation means different things to different stakeholders and that several institutional and structural challenges face rural communities living adjacent to protected areas.

KEY TERMS: community participation, Dwesa-Cwebe nature reserve, equity, justice, marginalisation, protected areas, rural communities, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing emphasis on community participation in protected area management in the post-apartheid South Africa to reduce inequality and promote inclusiveness, participatory democracy as well as to engender justice and equity. However, despite the focus on community participation, many of the rural communities in South Africa are still excluded from participation. Using the Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve and its adjacent communities in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa as a case study, this article examines some of the challenges faced by local communities in participation in the management of protected areas. The article aims to identify the socio-economic, political, and cultural factors that hinder meaningful community participation and the impacts thereof. By shedding light on these challenges, this study sought to inform the development of inclusive strategies and policies that prioritise both biodiversity conservation and the well-being of local communities. Additionally, by embracing community participation, the Eastern Cape region can foster equity and justice in protected areas management.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL EXCLUSION THEORY

According to Redmond *et al.* (2022), the social exclusion theory is a comprehensive concept that encompasses the marginalisation of individuals or groups, denying them access to resources and limiting their participation in social, environmental, economic, and political spheres. Although the concept means different things to different practitioners, the general agreement is that it is about the exclusion and marginalisation of some groups of people from participation. Redmond *et al.* (2022) describe social exclusion as a multifaceted concept that explores risks and consequences across various scopes and highlights the dynamic nature of exclusion. This dynamic nature is often portrayed through institutional and social relationships, which can have an intergenerational impact. Exclusion can manifest in limited access to participation, education, healthcare, employment, and social networks. Redmond *et al.*'s (2022) social exclusion theory can be contextualised within the South African setting. Social exclusion, as viewed by South African government entities and other welfare organisations, is closely linked to the inequalities stemming from the country's apartheid history and the resultant marginalisation. To address these inequalities, the South African government has implemented strategic policies such as the National Development Plan, which aims to eliminate all forms of inequality in education, healthcare, employment, and other areas by 2030.

Nhapi (2022) also explores these dynamics in Zimbabwe and provided recommendations on how the youths can overcome social exclusion in their livelihoods. In this article, Nhapi (2022) highlights the importance of active engagement and social innovation in empowering youths to resist exclusionary practices. These findings are in line with Sekher & Carciumaru (2019) who assert that in its multiple dimensions, social exclusion explores the processes underpinning poverty and group inequalities including social and political marginalisation in a society. Other studies contend that social exclusion is rooted in relational and structural processes. Relational processes involve interactions and relationships between individuals and groups, while structural processes encompass broader societal arrangements and systems that perpetuate exclusion (Zulu, 2017). Zulu (2017) underscores that social exclusion is driven by imbalances in power and societal structures, which consequently marginalise vulnerable groups. For instance, discrimination based on race, location, gender, or socioeconomic status can result in exclusionary practices and unequal distribution of resources.

To conceptualise this, rural communities may face restricted access to land and water resources, which are critical for their livelihoods. Social exclusion in natural resource management can have significant implications for rural development. When rural communities are excluded from managing and benefiting from natural resources, it exacerbates poverty and inequality. This exclusion can hinder efforts to achieve sustainable development goals, as the affected communities are deprived of essential resources and opportunities for economic advancement (Umejiesi, 2015).

For this study, the theory is used to understand the exclusion of rural communities from participation in the management of nature reserves – as well as the dynamics and impacts of this exclusion. This theory of social exclusion is used to understand the exclusion of rural communities in Africa from participating in the management of nature reserves. By examining the dynamics and impacts of this exclusion, the research aims to highlight the need for inclusive management practices that empower rural communities and promote sustainable development. Nyamahono (2024), provide critical insights into the mechanisms and consequences of social exclusion in natural resource management and underscore the importance of addressing these issues to foster equitable development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To review the relevant literature for this study, seven articles published between 2018-2023 were obtained from Google Scholar. From these articles, three interrelated themes were deduced, namely, (i) community participation,

(ii) management of protected areas, and (iii) community participation in the management of protected areas. These articles are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Articles included in the literature review

Article number	Title	Authors	Year published	Summary
1	<i>Participation dynamics in the management of protected areas: the case of Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve and its adjacent communities, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa</i>	Nyamahono, J. D.	2023	This research examines the participation dynamics in the management of the Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve and its adjacent communities, highlighting the challenges and opportunities for inclusive governance in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. The study emphasizes the need for collaborative approaches to enhance local community involvement and sustainable conservation efforts.
2	Factors influencing communities' attitudes and participation in protected area conservation: a case study from Northern Myanmar	Htay, T., Htoo, K. K., Mbise, F. P., & Røskoft, E.	2022	The article explores the factors influencing communities' attitudes and participation in protected area conservation in Northern Myanmar. The study identifies key determinants such as socio-economic benefits, cultural values, and perceptions of conservation effectiveness, which shape community engagement and support for protected area initiatives.
3	Science, ethnoscience and a dam: (Mis)reading the potential impacts of the Ntabelanga Dam.	Akpan, W, van Tol, J, Malambile M., & Mqalo N.	2017	The article investigates the differing perspectives between scientific assessments and ethno-scientific knowledge on the potential impacts of the Ntabelanga Dam. The study highlights how misreading and underestimating local knowledge can lead to conflicts and overlooked socio-environmental consequences.
4	Identifying enabling factors of science-policy interaction in a developing country context: A case study of South Africa's environment sector	Koch, S.	2018	The article examines the enabling factors that facilitate effective science-policy interaction in South Africa's environment sector. The study identifies key elements such as stakeholder collaboration, knowledge exchange platforms, and institutional support that enhance the integration of scientific research into policy-making processes.
5	When race and social equity matters in nature conservation in post-apartheid South Africa	Musavengane, R., & Leonard, L.	2019	The paper analyses the significance of race and social equity in nature conservation efforts in post-apartheid South Africa. The study explores how historical inequalities and contemporary socio-political dynamics influence conservation practices and the inclusion of marginalised communities in environmental management.
6	Protected areas and environmental conservation in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa: on HEIs, livelihoods	Moyo, I., & Cele, H.M.S.	2021	The paper explores the interplay between protected areas, environmental conservation, and sustainable development in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study examines how higher education institutions (HEIs) contribute to local livelihoods and

	and sustainable development			sustainable development through conservation efforts, highlighting the importance of integrating academic research with community needs and environmental management.
7	Tourism and sustainable development goals in the African context	Dube, K.	2020	This article examines the role of tourism in achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) within the African context. The study highlights how tourism can contribute to economic growth, environmental conservation, and social equity, while also addressing challenges such as resource management, community involvement, and policy implementation to ensure sustainable and inclusive development.

Community participation

Studies indicate that community participation plays a vital role in the management of protected areas, enabling local communities to actively engage in decision-making processes and contribute to the development and management of their environments. In rural development initiatives, it has been associated with numerous benefits for example, it enhances social cohesion, strengthens community resilience, and fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility and the empowerment of marginalised groups. According to Nyamahono (2023), pivotal to the control and utilisation of natural resources in protected areas is the participation and representation of the marginalised rural communities adjacent to the protected areas. Htay *et al.* (2022) also suggests that key to the sustainability of protected areas is understanding the interest of local communities and ensuring their support in conservation.

However, in rural communities like the Eastern Cape, community participation faces various challenges linked to limited capacity-building, education, information, and resources. Conflicting interests and divergent worldviews among stakeholders complicate decision-making processes and impede collaborative efforts. Limited capacity and resources at the community level and within conservation agencies also pose challenges to effective participation. In addition, power imbalances and exclusionary practices also marginalise vulnerable groups. In some instances, participation processes are mostly devoid of justice and equity -as some individuals obtain concrete benefits from the participation process by manipulating other stakeholders (Akpan, van Tol, Malambile & Mqalo, 2017). In marginalised rural communities in the Eastern Cape, community participation plays a huge role in the empowerment of communities, promoting sustainable development, equity, justice and addressing historical inequalities.

Management of protected areas

The management of protected areas is a crucial component of conservation efforts, ensuring the preservation of biodiversity and sustainable utilisation of natural resources. Community engagement plays a central role in the successful management of protected areas in rural South Africa. Accordingly, legislation mandates the reconnection of local communities with their environment - with an emphasis on their participation as primary participants in the sustainability of natural resource management (Koch, 2018). Recognising the rights and interests of local communities, establishing partnerships, and promoting meaningful participation can foster shared stewardship and enhance conservation outcomes. Community-based natural resource management initiatives empower communities to actively participate in decision-making processes, leading to improved livelihoods and increased support for conservation.

Musavengane and Leornard (2019) suggest that the management of protected areas is still exclusionary, with many black people left on the margins. Managing protected areas in rural South Africa therefore faces several challenges. Land tenure disputes, resource conflicts, and historical injustices which complicate the establishment and management of protected areas (Musavengane & Leornard, 2019). Insufficient funding, limited capacity, and inadequate enforcement hinder effective management and conservation outcomes. Moreover, conflicts between conservation objectives and the socio-economic needs of local communities can strain relationships and impede collaborative management efforts.

In rural Eastern Cape in particular, effective management of protected areas requires a comprehensive and integrated approach that addresses ecological, social, and economic dimensions of conservation. Community engagement, participatory approaches, and capacity building are crucial for successful management. Enhancing collaboration, integrating African knowledge, and promoting sustainable livelihoods can foster a sense of

ownership and shared responsibility for protected areas, leading to more effective conservation outcomes in the Eastern Cape.

Community participation in the management of protected areas

Protected areas have been advocated by scholars and institutional stakeholders as crucial environmental management spaces that play important institutional functions in ecological preservation. As a result, there have been increasing calls to move away from apartheid's top - down, exclusionary style to multi stakeholder partnerships - which prioritise varied collaborations between local communities, management agencies, non-governmental organisations, resource users and the government among others. In South Africa, the creation of many natural protected areas was on the backdrop of forced removals – where local communities were moved from their homes to remote and unproductive areas (Moyo & Cele, 2021). Considering South Africa's history of apartheid, the country found it necessary to prioritise and highlight participation to redress apartheid's injustices – and to establish a more equal and just society. The centrality of public participation was accentuated as a basic need and democratic right in every sphere. Community participation emphasises the involvement of local communities in decision-making processes and the recognition of their rights and responsibilities; highlights the importance of collaboration and learning among diverse stakeholders to navigate complex conservation challenges; advocates for the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens; as well as promoting the inclusion of marginalised communities in decision-making processes. Community participation in the management of protected areas in South Africa offers several benefits. It enhances social cohesion and strengthens the relationship between communities and protected areas. Active participation can lead to increased support for conservation efforts as communities gain a sense of ownership and responsibility for their natural resources. Furthermore, participation can contribute to improved livelihoods, as it provides opportunities for income generation through sustainable tourism, capacity building, and alternative livelihood options (Koch, 2018; Dube, 2020).

Despite the potential benefits for local communities, participation in protected area management faces several challenges including exclusionary policies, practices, and institutional barriers (Musavengane & Leonard, 2019) which undermine meaningful participation, particularly among marginalised groups. Conflicting interests, both within and between stakeholder groups, have also hindered effective collaboration and decision-making processes. Additionally, top-down institutional structures, bureaucratic hurdles, and legal frameworks that restrict local decision-making authority have reportedly impeded participation. A range of approaches have been employed to promote participation in the management of protected areas. Participatory planning processes, such as participatory mapping and stakeholder consultations, can enable local communities to contribute their knowledge and perspectives. Collaborative governance models, including co-management and partnerships between governmental and non-governmental organisations, have been effective in fostering shared decision-making and responsibilities. The establishment of community-based organisations and local committees can also provide platforms for community engagement and representation. By embracing participatory approaches, protected area management can become more inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable, leading to better conservation outcomes and enhanced well-being for local communities.

METHODOLOGY

This study took place at the Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve and its neighbouring communities. The Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve, established in 1890, spans over 5,500 hectares of offshore land and nearly 20,000 hectares of marine land. Its creation necessitated the relocation of local communities from the coast to 3-5 kilometres inland, forming seven villages: Ntubeni, Ngomana, Cwebe, Mpume, Ntlangano, Mendwane, and Hobeni. This led to the division from the nature reserve and restricted the indigenous peoples' use of coastal resources. In the 1970s, the reserve was formally declared under the Transkei Nature Conservation Act and fenced in 1975 to prevent any interference by local communities. The Dwesa-Cwebe Marine Protected Area (MPA) was proclaimed in 1992, further limiting local access to coastal resources. After the 1994 democratic elections, native reserves were incorporated into South Africa, and the Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve was regulated under the National Forests Act No. 84 of 1998.

Following political instability and drought after 1994, local communities began reoccupying the reserve, leading to military intervention and government negotiations. The Land Rights Act of 1996 facilitated the return of land to local communities, culminating in the 2001 Settlement Agreement. This agreement transferred ownership to the local communities. Today, the reserve is owned by the local communities but the institutional conservation practices are regulated by the Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency, amidst ongoing policy debates on land ownership and environmental sustainability in South Africa.

The study was qualitative in nature following Keikelame and Swartz (2019) findings which state that this approach allows the researcher to communicate effectively with study participants. The research was also

‘explorative’ and ‘interpretive’ in nature, with the goal of exploring the challenges faced by marginalised rural communities in participating in the management of protected areas. The researcher used the headmen to assemble focus groups in four villages that participated in this study, making a total of N=32 participants. These participants consisted of the women, the youths and the elderly. In addition, the researcher also purposely selected one headman from each of the four villages to engage in in-depth interviews to provide their locally authoritative viewpoints on their participation in the management of natural resources. Additionally, the parks manager responsible for the institutionalised management of Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve also participated in in-depth interviews.

The inclusion of headmen, local communities, and the Nature Reserve Manager was conducted in line with ethical clearance reference AKP011SNYA01, provided by the University of Fort Hare. The researcher received ethical clearance from the Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency and the University of Fort Hare Research and Ethics Committee, ensuring that the research adhered to standards of informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, and protection of participants and data. This process ensured that all interactions and data collection methods respected the participants' rights and upheld the ethical guidelines required for conducting research in sensitive community settings. Such rigorous adherence to ethical standards not only legitimised the research but also fostered trust and cooperation among the local communities, which was crucial for the study's success and integrity.

FINDINGS

This section presents the study themes and subthemes in line with the research objectives.

Theme 1: non-participation in the management of Dwesa-Cwebe nature reserve

The research objective underpinning this theme is to examine the nature and dynamics of participation in the management of Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve. This involves analysing how local communities, particularly marginalised groups, engage with the management structures of the reserve and the extent to which their contributions influence decision-making processes. By doing so, the research hopes to provide insights into improving participatory management practices that can lead to more inclusive and sustainable conservation efforts.

Sub-theme 1: Exclusion from employment opportunities

As already noted, the research objective underpinning this theme is to examine the nature and dynamics of participation in the management of Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve. Exclusion from employment opportunities is one challenge that was identified by some of the participants. This exclusion poses a significant hurdle for marginalised rural communities residing in the Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve. As observed in the statements below, they express discontent as they highlight that employment positions within the reserve are often granted to individuals from external communities, despite their own attempts to secure these opportunities by submitting their CVs and actively pursuing employment within the reserve. Such inequitable employment practices strain the relationship between the local population and the management of the reserve as articulated by two leaders below:

We have people who look for jobs that are from the local villages. Our kids go there [to the nature reserve] to submit their CVs but you find out that kids from elsewhere do get jobs while our kids remain unemployed. So that is why I am saying the relationship between the local people and the management of the nature reserve is not good at all because they choose who to employ without thinking about anyone from our communities (Leader).

Another leader had the following to say about the exclusion of local communities from environmental management:

Our people need jobs, but you know they do not have jobs for them there. The current organisations we have failed to do so a long time ago. I think there is something to do with the managers because why are they not doing anything or say something when they go to meetings (Leader).

Another notable theme that arises from the study is the exclusion of community members from senior-level managerial positions within the nature reserve. The study found that except for the low-skilled and other general roles, the government does not employ the local communities in management positions. Although the government had made promises to employ local individuals at all levels, including managerial positions, there has been limited

progress in fulfilling this commitment. The failure to provide training and opportunities for residents in managerial roles fosters disillusionment and unmet expectations among community members. The following excerpt provides more information:

There is a combination of many things why the government does not employ the local people in senior level management. The government promised that local people will be employed in the nature reserve and even in the senior levels. The local communities were also promised to be trained as managers but till today nothing has been done (Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve Manager).

Considering South Africa's history of apartheid, the country found it necessary to prioritise and highlight participation to redress apartheid's injustices – and to establish a more equal and just society. The centrality of public participation was accentuated as a basic need and democratic right in every sphere. However, from these findings, local communities have been left on the margins of development as they are excluded from occupying managerial posts. With dissatisfaction, leaders noted that the recruitment and selection lacks equity and justice. Their sentiments indicate that Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve management is highly contested, complex and manipulated.

Sub-theme 2: exclusion from representation

Community members from marginalised rural communities in the Dwesa-Cwebe area perceive that their needs are not adequately represented by community-based organisations, such as the Community Property Associations (CPAs) and the Land Trust. Despite their involvement in the formation of these entities, community members express disappointment in the organisations' failure to prioritise their specific needs. Some community members suspect that these representatives may have been influenced or remunerated to disregard the interests of the local population. The following concerns were brought out during an interview with a leader:

Most of the people in our age groups formed part of the negotiations which led to the formation of the CPAs and the Land Trust. When they were formed, we were all in support of them because we were hoping that they will represent the needs of the people. But now we are seeing that they are representing the needs of other people not our needs. Maybe they were even paid not to represent us (Leader).

Additionally, the displacement of communities from their ancestral lands due to the establishment of the nature reserve has led to their exclusion from environmental activities. These communities previously relied on the reserve's resources for their livelihoods, with their livestock grazing on the nutrient-rich grass within the reserve. The loss of access to these resources disrupts their way of life and diminishes their sense of belonging. Consequently, the communities feel disempowered and question the rationale behind expecting their involvement in the reserve's management when they no longer possess ownership or rights over the land.

Our livestock would stay there in that nature reserve. They used to eat the nutritious grass in the nature reserve and our houses used to be there. The whole village used to stay there, as it was our homes. That is the homes our grandfathers and their grandfathers knew as their homes. Their houses were there, and the ruins can even be seen. Our livelihoods were based there, and they knew how to survive and raise their villages there. But eventually things changed, and we became invisible villages. They were told that the land is not theirs anymore. It does not make sense because an outsider would just come and tell people that things have changed, and the land is not yours anymore, so you must help us save it. How do they expect us to help them manage it? (Focus Group Participant).

Many youths also voiced their concerns about being excluded from environmental activities and decision-making processes regarding conservation efforts. They expressed frustration at being ignored by the government and treated as unimportant, despite their ancestral and spiritual ties to the land. The youths highlighted that stereotypical prejudices held by institutional authorities prevented them from having a say in how the environment should be conserved and managed. They felt marginalised and viewed as outsiders in a place where their cultural heritage and historical roots were deeply embedded. An unemployed male graduate suggested the following:

All of us here and our parents were born in Cwebe. We have known this reserve since the day we were born. There is no other place that we know except this place and these forests. Our parents have fallen in love with these forests because it is part of them. The forests have a connection with

our parents because they are part of them. So, this issue that the manager who come from other places tell us that we manage the natural resources in a particular way is disrespectful. Who gave them the authority to declare to us or our parents or our grandparents that their ways of managing nature is not effective? Who approved theirs as the most effective ones? (Focus Group Participant).

The failure to represent the needs of the community indicates the difficulties encountered in achieving effective community engagement in protected area management. This practice undermines socio-economic development, fosters resentment, and diminishes cooperation from local populations, complicating conservation efforts. Integrating local communities into employment structures of protected areas is essential for socio-economic justice and the long-term success of conservation programs. Such exclusion not only undermines the socio-economic stability of the affected communities but also impedes effective conservation efforts, as local knowledge and cultural practices are integral to sustainable environmental management. Additionally, the lack of involvement in decision-making processes fosters a sense of alienation and disenfranchisement among the communities, further exacerbating the challenges faced in managing protected areas effectively.

Theme 2: marginalisation and exclusion

This theme is guided by the second research objective which seeks to explore some of the challenges faced by local communities in participation in the management of protected areas.

Sub-theme 1: communities not benefiting from nature reserves

Despite assurances of community benefits from the nature reserve, local communities perceive a lack of tangible benefits reaching them. Community members report inadequate communication and responsiveness from reserve management when they raise concerns or file complaints. Some community leaders speculate that the representatives who should be advocating for their interests may be exploiting the benefits for their own gain, resulting in growing dissatisfaction and mistrust as observed below:

The problem is that they always say they will communicate with top management to ensure that the people do benefit from the nature reserve, but nothing really does happen. At times, we tend to think that these representatives are eating together the benefits of the nature reserve because the community does not get anything or even reply after they lodge their complaints. They are just useless because they do not know what their people needs (Leader).

Some community members also support this view, considering their unemployment unjustified. They believe they could easily be employed by the nature reserve but that is not the case for many years:

We do not see much of benefits in this nature reserve for the main reason that this has been the issue over the years and there are no tangible economic benefits that we can really talk about. This reserve should be the primary and most immediate source of employment but it does not employ a lot of people from our villages. We feel that this is not fair because we do not have anything to show out of it (Focus Group Participant)

The lack of tangible benefits reaching local communities within the context of protected area management reflects a broader discourse on the effectiveness of benefit-sharing mechanisms. Without these elements, the potential synergies between conservation goals and local community interests remain under-realised, hindering sustainable conservation outcomes and perpetuating socio-economic disparities in these regions. This presents a challenge because it threatens the sustainability of all developmental plans; local communities cannot provide their full support if they do not benefit from the proposed initiatives. Without tangible benefits, community engagement and cooperation are hindered, undermining the success of these plans.

Sub-theme 2: non-consultation of communities in decision-making

A crucial issue highlighted by the study is the limited involvement of local communities in decision-making processes concerning the management of the nature reserve. Community members often discover changes in reserve management without prior knowledge or comprehension of the decision-making process. This lack of transparency and inclusion fuels a sense of alienation among community members and undermines their trust in the reserve's management as noted below:

What they do is that we only find out that they have changed the management while we do not know how it has changed and what happened. We only see when there is a new manager without our knowledge. You do not even know where the management is coming from you just find it gone with a new person that you do not even know where they originate from (Leader).

The study also reveals a perception among community members that their requests for meetings and consultations are often disregarded by the Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve authorities. Although the reserve management expects full attendance when they call for meetings, community requests for meetings are frequently denied or ignored. This unequal treatment further exacerbates tensions and highlights a lack of genuine commitment to community development. Community members express frustration that despite attending these meetings, no tangible development or benefits are brought to the community as expressed below:

What the Dwesa-Cwebe people do not want is to have meetings when they call us only. We also ask for meetings, but they do not want to do these meetings but when they ask, they want everyone to attend. What disturbs the most is that the meetings when they are called, they do not bring anything or development to the community, but all the villages attend the meetings (Focus Group Participant).

The statements above indicate that when local communities are not actively involved, their invaluable knowledge and insights are often overlooked. This knowledge is crucial for effective and sustainable environmental management. Furthermore, the disconnect created by top-down management approaches can lead to increased conflicts and resistance from local populations, who may feel disenfranchised and marginalised. To address these issues, it is imperative to adopt more inclusive and participatory governance frameworks that empower local communities and integrate their knowledge and priorities into conservation strategies.

DISCUSSION

Perpetual exclusion of local communities

The exclusion of local communities from employment opportunities within protected areas is a pervasive challenge worldwide (Kepe, 2014). This exclusion perpetuates economic disparities and exacerbates social inequities, depriving local communities of potential income and career growth associated with conservation and tourism activities. Additionally, the lack of representation of community members in employment positions is not unique to the Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve but reflects a broader pattern in protected area management. Often, employment opportunities are allocated to external actors rather than local communities, leading to a disconnect between the management of the protected areas and the people who have historical and cultural ties to the land (Lunstrum, 2014).

This highlights a disparity between the intended goals of community-based organisations and their actual performance in advocating for and addressing the concerns of local communities (Anaya & Espírito-Santo, 2018). This gap points to the challenges in translating policy intentions into practical actions that genuinely include and benefit local populations. The disconnect between policy and practice often results in the marginalisation of communities, which undermines the goals of sustainability and equity in conservation efforts. Effective community engagement requires not only the inclusion of local voices in decision-making processes but also the alignment of organisational practices with the real needs and priorities of these communities (Nyamahono, 2024). The displacement and exclusion of communities from environmental activities and resources are significant issues raised by the study. Similar findings have been reported in other studies, highlighting the loss of livelihoods and cultural heritage experienced when communities are displaced from their ancestral lands (Moyo & Cele, 2021). This disruption affects the well-being of local communities, diminishing their motivation and sense of ownership in contributing to the management of protected areas.

Continuous marginalisation

Scholars and practitioners alike emphasize that equitable distribution of benefits is crucial not only for improving local livelihoods but also for garnering community support and enhancing participation in conservation efforts (Abdu-Raheem, 2010; Aditya, 2016). When communities perceive minimal direct benefits from conservation initiatives, their willingness to engage and cooperate diminishes. Furthermore, inadequate communication and responsiveness from reserve management exacerbate these issues. Effective partnerships between communities and protected area authorities require transparent communication channels, responsive feedback mechanisms, and collaborative decision-making processes (Fischer *et al.*, 2011; Kalina *et al.*, 2019).

A review of available literature indicates that similar challenges have been identified in the wider context of community participation in the management of protected areas. The limited involvement of local communities in decision-making processes reflects the persistent challenge of top-down approaches to conservation that systematically exclude the voices and perspectives of local stakeholders (Kruger & Bekker, 2020). This exclusion not only alienates communities but also diminishes their sense of ownership and responsibility towards conservation efforts, ultimately undermining the sustainability of protected areas. The lack of transparency and participation in decision-making processes significantly undermines the legitimacy and effectiveness of protected area management initiatives (Nyamahono, 2023).

Research conducted in South Africa underscores the significance of community involvement in decision-making processes to achieve equitable and sustainable outcomes (Kruger & Bekker, 2020). However, the findings from this study align with previous research, suggesting that the participation of rural communities in protected area management often entails exclusion, lack of representation, limited benefits, and marginalisation (Matose, 2009; Matose, 2016). These issues highlight the systemic barriers that prevent effective community engagement and emphasize the need for more inclusive governance structures. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to integrate local voices into management plans, ensuring that conservation strategies are not only effective but also just and equitable.

Integrating Redmond *et al.*'s (2022) social exclusion theory, it is evident that social exclusion is a multifaceted concept encompassing the marginalisation of individuals or groups, denying them access to resources, and limiting their participation in social, environmental, economic, and political spheres. This theoretical framework helps to provide a clear understanding of the dynamic nature of exclusion in protected area management, which is often portrayed through institutional and social relationships, having intergenerational impacts. The exclusion and marginalisation of local communities from employment and decision-making processes in protected areas reflect the broader issues of social exclusion, underscoring the need for inclusive and equitable governance practices in conservation efforts.

IMPLICATIONS

The themes identified in this study shed light on the challenges faced by marginalised rural communities in South Africa concerning their participation in the management of protected areas. These challenges align with existing literature, underscoring the necessity for more inclusive and equitable approaches to community engagement in protected area management. Addressing these challenges necessitates collaborative efforts among local communities, reserve management, and policymakers to ensure the implementation of participatory processes, transparent decision-making, and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms. This includes adopting inclusive and participatory approaches, strengthening community empowerment and capacity-building, and establishing equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms. Frontline development practitioners, such as social workers employed by the Department of Social Development, social development practitioners, and their counterparts in not-for-profit organisations, play a crucial role in driving these processes. These practitioners can facilitate community engagement by leveraging their expertise in social mobilisation, advocacy, and capacity-building. They can help bridge the gap between local communities and reserve management by ensuring that the voices and perspectives of marginalised groups are heard and incorporated into management plans. Furthermore, these practitioners can support the development and implementation of community-based initiatives that promote sustainable livelihoods and natural resource management. By fostering partnerships and facilitating dialogues, social workers and development practitioners can contribute to creating a more equitable and inclusive framework for protected area management, ultimately leading to better conservation outcomes and enhanced community well-being. Additionally, it is crucial to prioritise the representation of local community voices and perspectives in all aspects of protected area management. By fostering genuine partnerships between local communities, reserve management, and policymakers, and with the active involvement of development practitioners, it is possible to achieve more equitable and sustainable management of protected areas that prioritise the needs and aspirations of local communities. Social workers and development practitioners can also play a pivotal role in educating and training community members, thereby enhancing their capacity to participate effectively in conservation efforts. They can ensure that the processes are not only inclusive but also culturally sensitive and respectful of the local communities' heritage and knowledge. Integrating these roles into the management strategies can drive systemic changes that align with the broader goals of social equity and environmental sustainability.

CONCLUSION

This article has provided a summary of the challenges faced by marginalised rural communities in South Africa regarding their participation in the management of protected areas. The study identified the socio-economic, political and cultural factors that hinder meaningful community engagement and decision-making processes. These challenges include socio-economic barriers like limited access to socio-economic opportunities, political

obstacles, including inadequate representation, bureaucratic complexities, and conflicting stakeholder interests and cultural factors such as differing worldviews. The research aims to contribute to the development of inclusive strategies and policies that promote equitable community participation, leading to more effective and sustainable conservation outcomes. Given South Africa's diverse rural communities and rich biodiversity, it serves as an ideal context for this investigation.

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