



## Ethical Dimensions of Capacity-Building for Community Engagement: A Study of Ward Committee Members in Johannesburg's Ward 68

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### ABSTRACT

**Research Problem:** Ward Committees play a critical role in facilitating community engagement and participatory governance at the local level. However, in Johannesburg's Ward 68, limited and inconsistent capacity-building initiatives raise ethical and moral concerns regarding accountability, trust, and inclusivity in local governance. Insufficient training and institutional support undermine the ability of Ward Committee members to engage communities effectively and ethically.

**Research Purposes:** This study aims to examine capacity-building initiatives among Ward Committees in Ward 68 of the City of Johannesburg, with a particular focus on the ethical and moral dimensions of community engagement. Specifically, the study seeks to identify ways to enhance the skills, knowledge, and ethical competencies required by Ward Committee members to foster trust, accountability, and constructive relationships with local communities.

**Research Methods:** The study adopts a qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten Ward Committee members, while secondary data were obtained from academic journals, government publications, and City of Johannesburg reports. The data were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and themes relevant to ethical governance and capacity-building.

**Results and Discussion:** The findings reveal that the City of Johannesburg primarily provided induction training for Ward Committees, with limited follow-up or continuous capacity-building. Some members were unable to attend the training due to various constraints, while others attended but could not recall its content. These limitations, alongside broader structural and operational challenges, weakened the ethical effectiveness of Ward Committees, particularly in promoting inclusive participation, accountability, and trust in community engagement.

**Research Implications and Contributions:** This study contributes empirical insights into the ethical challenges affecting capacity-building in Ward Committees within a metropolitan governance context. It highlights the need for ethically informed, ward-specific training programmes, clearer role definitions, improved remuneration, and equitable representation policies. By foregrounding the moral dimensions of participatory governance, the study offers practical and theoretical contributions to debates on ethical public policy and local governance in South Africa.

**Keywords:** Capacity-building, Ethical governance, Moral responsibility, Community engagement, Public participation, Ward Committees, Local governance.

### INTRODUCTION

This study investigated ward committee capacity-building for community engagement in Ward 68 during the 2021 local government administration, with particular attention to the ethical and moral

dimensions of participatory governance. Following the democratic transition in 1994, South Africa restructured its local government system and introduced participatory governance as a foundational principle, emphasizing the moral obligation of the state to involve residents in decision-making processes (Piper & Deacon, 2009). Ward committees were established as institutional mechanisms to strengthen community participation and to serve as ethical intermediaries between communities and municipalities. These committees consist of elected community members mandated to represent local interests and concerns, thereby carrying a moral responsibility to ensure that community voices are genuinely reflected in municipal decision-making. Consequently, it is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of capacity-building measures aimed at enhancing ward committees' ability to facilitate meaningful community engagement and uphold principles of accountability, inclusivity, and democratic representation in Ward 68. Understanding the challenges faced by ward committees in fulfilling these ethical responsibilities provides important insights into improving their operational effectiveness and moral legitimacy.

In South Africa, capacity-building for ward committees remains a persistent governance challenge, particularly in metropolitan contexts such as Johannesburg. Existing studies indicate that committee members are often inadequately prepared to perform their duties effectively, as induction workshops tend to lack depth, continuity, and ethical orientation (Ngumbela, 2023; Mutereko, 2021). Training programmes frequently adopt a "one-size-fits-all" approach that overlooks the distinct sociopolitical and moral contexts of individual wards, thereby constraining committees' ability to respond ethically to service delivery challenges. Magoola et al. (2023) argue that contextualised training and sustained institutional support are critical for fostering civic engagement, strengthening institutional trust, and reinforcing accountability within governance frameworks. Without targeted and ethically informed capacity-building initiatives, ward committees risk functioning as symbolic structures rather than as morally grounded platforms for inclusive governance.

Inclusivity constitutes another ethical dimension closely linked to training and capacity-building among ward committees. While Mohlala (2024) demonstrates that gender-balanced participation enhances comprehensive community decision-making, the continued lack of disability inclusion marginalises significant segments of the population and raises concerns about procedural justice in governance processes. Committees that reflect diversity in age, gender, and educational background are better positioned to engage constructively with municipal authorities and local communities (Auriacombe & Sithomola, 2020; Buccus, 2021). Nevertheless, their effectiveness is undermined by systemic constraints, including insufficient training, inadequate stipends, and political interference, which collectively erode the ethical foundations of participatory governance (Qwabe & Mdaka, 2011; Mnqayi, 2021). Municipalities are therefore morally and constitutionally obligated to prioritise inclusive and continuous capacity-building programmes that extend beyond induction training and align with democratic principles of representation and accountability.

Qwabe and Mdaka (2011) posit that local governance structures are intended to facilitate community engagement; however, in Ward 68, meaningful participation remains limited despite the presence of ward committees as the lowest tier of governance. Ward committee members often possess low levels of formal education and skills and frequently lack a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Redflank (2020) notes that insufficient knowledge and skills diminish the capacity of ward committees to facilitate communication among stakeholders, thereby weakening their ethical role as mediators between communities and municipal institutions. The need to capacitate ward committee members through education and skills development is therefore essential to enhance their ability to discharge their duties responsibly and effectively (Redflank, 2020). Similarly, Zulu (2020) emphasises that ward committees require empowerment through training, access to information, and institutional encouragement to fulfil their role in service delivery. However, existing training initiatives may be ineffective in enabling ward committee members to perform their functions adequately (Dullar Omah Institute, 2021).

The core problem addressed by this study is the limited participation of ward committee members in leading community meetings and the low levels of attendance and engagement in public participation forums, such as budget consultations and Integrated Development Plan (IDP) meetings, in Johannesburg's Ward 68. Ward committees struggle to mobilise communities and facilitate stakeholder communication due to insufficient knowledge, inadequate training, and limited clarity regarding their roles and responsibilities. Their reliance on generic induction seminars—often poorly contextualised,

easily forgotten, and unsupported by ongoing capacity-building—undermines their ability to engage communities effectively. This persistent failure compromises the ethical principles of democracy, accountability, and participatory governance at the local level.

Although substantial scholarship exists on the importance and effectiveness of ward committees in promoting public participation, limited attention has been paid to the specific capacity-building interventions designed to enhance their ability to engage communities ethically and effectively. There is a notable gap in research examining the nature and adequacy of skills development, training, and institutional support provided by municipalities to ward committees. Furthermore, most existing studies focus on municipal-level analyses or randomly selected wards, leaving Ward 68 underexplored. Given that public participation constitutes a moral cornerstone of democratic governance, ward committees and community structures are legally embedded within the definition of a municipality (Piper & Deacon, 2009). Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to explore how training initiatives contribute to capacitating ward committee members to engage communities in Ward 68. By foregrounding the ethical dimensions of participation and representation, the study seeks to ensure that communities are meaningfully involved in decision-making processes affecting their development. Achieving this objective requires the formulation of appropriate, context-sensitive training programmes that clearly articulate the ethical roles and responsibilities of ward committees in democratic governance.



**Figure 1. Ward 68 Map**

Source: City of Johannesburg (2023)

This study adopted a qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews to obtain in-depth insights into ward committee capacity-building and community engagement in Ward 68. Semi-structured interviews were selected due to their flexibility in capturing participants' experiences and perspectives (Babbie, 2017). Qualitative research is effective in exploring complex human experiences and ethical dimensions of governance (Rahman, 2017), while allowing for the collection of non-numerical data to enhance understanding of social phenomena (Olejnik, 2021). Although qualitative research relies heavily on researcher expertise, the researchers' academic and practical background provided a strong foundation for conducting the study (Mnqayi, 2021). Primary data were collected through interviews, emails, and WhatsApp conversations, while secondary data were sourced from scholarly publications and official reports (Kumar, 2014). Interviews lasting between 20 and 40 minutes

were audio-recorded and supplemented with handwritten notes to capture verbal and non-verbal cues (Opdenakker, 2006; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns related to roles and responsibilities, training effectiveness, challenges, and community engagement (Babbie, 2017).

The study was conducted in Johannesburg, South Africa, which has an estimated population of six million and the largest metropolitan economy in Africa (City of Johannesburg [CoJ], 2021). Ward 68, located in the western part of Johannesburg, comprises Riverlea, Pennyville, Zama Impilo, Antea Hostel, and Crown Mines (see Figure 1). The ward has a population of 28,334 residents, predominantly Black, White, and Coloured (WaziMap, 2016). The target population consisted of ten ward committee members involved in community participation and decision-making (Babbie, 2017). Due to limited availability and recall of training among some members, purposive sampling was used to select current and former members with relevant experience, resulting in six usable datasets (Punch, 2014; Olejnik, 2021). The study was guided by the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000, which mandates public participation, and ethical reflexivity was maintained despite the researcher's political affiliation, ensuring that findings were not influenced by positionality (Holmes, 2020).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Capacity-Building for Ward Committees and Ethical Local Governance**

Ward committees were established to enhance citizen involvement and engagement in local government affairs, reflecting a normative commitment to participatory democracy and ethical governance. According to Thornhill and Madumo (2012), the primary purpose of ward committees is to promote local democracy in matters of local government, a view supported by Mutereko et al. (2021), who argue that ward committees function as an institutional link between municipalities and communities. When these committees fail to fulfil their mandates, municipalities carry a moral and administrative responsibility to implement capacity-building measures that enable ward committee members to perform their duties effectively. However, empirical evidence suggests that the introduction of ward committees has not necessarily translated into meaningful community engagement or improved information flows, largely due to inadequate capacity-building initiatives, particularly in resource-constrained municipalities (Qwabe & Mdaka, 2021). Similar findings by Mutereko et al. (2021) in the eThekweni municipality indicate that insufficient training undermines the promotion of local democracy.

Although some municipalities provide training to ward committee members, the effectiveness of such interventions remains uneven. Mtshali (2016) reports that while some committee members found municipal training helpful in clarifying roles and responsibilities, they perceived a disconnect between their training and that of councillors, raising ethical concerns about role parity, fairness, and institutional coherence. The Local Government Sector Education and Training Authority (LGSETA) is mandated to enhance the competencies of ward committees and councillors through skills development, stakeholder engagement training, and ongoing mentoring (LGSETA, 2020). Despite these institutional frameworks, responsibility for organising capacity-building workshops ultimately rests with municipal management structures, and gaps in coordination persist (Mnqayi, 2021). Legislative guidance, such as the Republic of South Africa: Department of Local Government Notice 965 of 2005, prescribes structured capacity-building plans, budgets, and training needs assessments for ward committees, underscoring their ethical obligation to function as empowered and accountable representatives of local communities (Mnqayi, 2021).

### **Training, Skills Development, and Moral Effectiveness**

Training is widely recognised as a critical mechanism for enhancing organisational and individual effectiveness. Ismael et al. (2021) distinguish between on-the-job and off-the-job training, both of which aim to equip individuals with relevant skills and knowledge. While on-the-job training offers practical exposure, it may be ineffective if participants are unresponsive or unable to translate learning into practice (Shah et al., 2018; Ismael et al., 2021). Off-the-job training, typically conducted through seminars and workshops, allows participants to engage with new knowledge in an environment conducive to reflection and learning (Ismael et al., 2021). The Republic of South Africa: Department of Local Government (Notice 965 of 2005) outlines comprehensive training requirements for ward committee

members, including generic skills such as communication, leadership, conflict management, democratic participation, and needs prioritisation, as well as specialised competencies related to municipal policies, budgeting, and governance processes.

However, several studies highlight that limited education and skills among ward committee members undermine the effectiveness of training initiatives. Sibiya (2016) and Bambeni (2017) note that low literacy levels and limited formal education make it difficult for some members to grasp municipal procedures, budgeting, and legislative frameworks, thereby constraining their ability to stimulate effective public participation. Even when municipalities invest in training, these structural constraints may limit the ethical impact of capacity-building efforts (Bambeni, 2017). Budgetary limitations further restrict municipalities' ability to implement sustained training programmes, although recent allocations in the City of Johannesburg's medium-term budget signal a commitment to enhancing public participation and civic education (City of Johannesburg [CoJ], 2023).

### **Trust as an Ethical Foundation of Community Engagement**

Trust emerges in the literature as a central ethical component of community engagement and participatory governance. Scholars across disciplines emphasise the role of social, institutional, and political trust in shaping citizen participation (Churchill & Mishra, 2016; Schneider, 2017). Magoola et al. (2023) argue that meaningful community involvement fosters trust by enabling communities to identify challenges and co-produce solutions. Conversely, ineffective utilisation of ward committees can generate distrust, disillusionment, and social unrest (Madzivhandila & Maloka, 2014). The Department of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG) (2007) identifies trust, commitment, and respect as core principles of public participation, framing trust as confidence in both governance processes and facilitators.

Ward committees require a baseline level of trust from communities to function effectively as intermediaries. Kim (2015) suggests that trust is a useful indicator for measuring citizen confidence in government, while Esau (2008) links low trust to reluctance in engaging with governance structures. Poor service delivery and unmet expectations further erode trust, contributing to community disengagement. Nevertheless, the continued election of ward committees suggests that some degree of moral expectation and residual trust persists, highlighting the importance of performance monitoring and accountability in rebuilding relationships between municipalities and communities (Kearney, 2018).

### **Ward Committees, Participation, and Ethical Challenges**

Ward committees play a crucial role in coordinating community participation in municipal affairs, including Integrated Development Plan (IDP) processes and other governance initiatives (Mutereko et al., 2021). They provide platforms for marginalised voices, promote civic empowerment, and strengthen civil society engagement (Buccus, 2021). Despite their potential, ward committees face significant challenges, including limited authority, political interference, skills deficits, and questions of legitimacy (Auriacombe & Sithomola, 2020; Diedericks & Seithloho, 2018). The absence of executive power and reluctance by elected officials to share decision-making authority often marginalise ward committees, weakening their ethical standing and effectiveness (Mutereko et al., 2021).

Political interference further undermines the moral autonomy of ward committees, as party dominance may compromise independent decision-making and community representation (Sibiya, 2016; Ngumbela, 2023). These dynamics risk transforming ward committees into symbolic entities rather than ethically grounded mechanisms of participatory governance. Persistent challenges related to skills shortages, unclear roles, and inadequate training reinforce the need for robust, ethically informed capacity-building interventions to ensure that ward committees can fulfil their democratic mandate effectively (Qwabe & Mdaka, 2006; Redflank, 2020).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Training Gaps and the Ethical Limits of a One-Size-Fits-All Approach**

The findings of this study reveal significant gaps in the capacity-building of Ward Committee members in Johannesburg's Ward 68, particularly with regard to the absence of sustained and context-sensitive training initiatives. Participants consistently reported that their exposure to capacity-building

was limited to a single induction workshop conducted at the beginning of their term. Beyond this introductory session, no structured follow-up training or continuous skills development initiatives were provided. This lack of continuity not only undermines the functional effectiveness of Ward Committees but also raises deeper ethical concerns regarding institutional responsibility and the moral obligations of local government to support participatory governance.

The admission by a city delegate that “the city had not provided any skills development training to the current Ward Committees” (Iladi, 2023) is particularly revealing. Given that these committee members were elected in 2021, the prolonged absence of further training reflects a systemic neglect of the ethical duty to equip governance structures with the competencies necessary to fulfil their mandates. Participatory governance is not merely a procedural requirement but a moral commitment grounded in principles of accountability, responsiveness, and respect for citizen agency. When municipalities fail to provide ongoing capacity-building, they effectively compromise the ethical foundations upon which participatory governance is built.

From an ethical policy perspective, the reliance on a once-off induction workshop suggests an instrumental rather than normative approach to participation. Instead of viewing ward committees as morally significant actors entrusted with representing community interests, the training approach appears to treat them as symbolic structures that merely satisfy legislative compliance. This observation resonates with broader critiques of participatory governance mechanisms in South Africa, where structures are often established to meet formal requirements without sufficient investment in their substantive functioning. Such practices raise questions about procedural justice and the sincerity of democratic commitments at the local government level.

Furthermore, the induction training provided to Ward Committee members was region-based and generic in nature, failing to address the specific socio-economic, spatial, and political realities of Ward 68. This one-size-fits-all approach significantly limits the relevance and effectiveness of training, as it does not engage with the lived realities of committee members or the communities they serve. Ethical governance requires sensitivity to context, as moral decision-making in policy implementation is shaped by local conditions, power relations, and community needs. By overlooking the unique challenges of Ward 68, the municipality inadvertently weakened the moral capacity of ward committees to respond appropriately and ethically to community concerns.

The inability of participants to recall the content of the induction training further underscores the inadequacy of this approach. Respondent 7 explicitly stated that they “could not remember what was covered during the all-day event,” highlighting not only the ineffectiveness of the training delivery but also the absence of reinforcement mechanisms. Learning that is not reinforced through follow-up sessions, practical application, or continuous support is unlikely to translate into meaningful behavioural or institutional change. From an ethical standpoint, this raises concerns about the responsible use of public resources, as training initiatives that do not result in improved governance outcomes fail to honour the principle of accountability to both participants and the broader public.

The findings suggest that the lack of sustained capacity-building has tangible implications for the ethical performance of ward committees. Without adequate training, committee members struggle to fully understand their roles, responsibilities, and the limits of their authority. This often results in unrealistic expectations from community members, miscommunication, and frustration on both sides. In such contexts, ward committee members may unintentionally mislead communities, eroding trust and undermining the moral legitimacy of participatory governance structures. Ethical governance depends not only on good intentions but also on the competence to act responsibly and transparently within institutional constraints.

The experience of Ward 68 is not unique. Similar patterns have been documented in other municipalities, reinforcing the systemic nature of the problem. Mnqayi’s (2021) study in KwaDukuza found that ward committees frequently operate with minimal supervision, limited resources, and insufficient institutional support. These conditions significantly reduce their effectiveness and weaken their ethical mandate as representatives of community interests. The convergence of findings across different contexts suggests that inadequate capacity-building is not an isolated administrative oversight but a broader governance failure with ethical implications.

From a moral policy perspective, the absence of continuous training reflects a disconnect between the ideals of participatory democracy and the realities of implementation. Participatory governance



assumes that citizens and their representatives are empowered with the knowledge and skills necessary to engage meaningfully in decision-making processes. When this assumption is not met, participation risks becoming superficial, reinforcing existing power imbalances rather than challenging them. In Ward 68, the lack of capacity-building has limited the ability of ward committees to engage critically with municipal processes, advocate effectively for community needs, and hold local authorities accountable.

The ethical limitations of the one-size-fits-all training approach are further compounded by the dynamic and evolving nature of governance challenges. Community needs, policy frameworks, and service delivery priorities change over time, requiring ward committee members to continuously adapt and update their knowledge. A static induction model fails to recognise this reality and undermines the principle of moral responsiveness in governance. Ethical public policy demands not only initial preparation but also sustained support that enables actors to respond responsibly to emerging challenges.

Moreover, the failure to provide ongoing capacity-building places an undue moral burden on ward committee members themselves. As unpaid or minimally compensated community representatives, they are expected to navigate complex governance systems, manage community expectations, and mediate conflicts without adequate institutional backing. This situation raises concerns about fairness and distributive justice, as responsibility is devolved without corresponding support. Ethical governance requires that authority and responsibility be matched with appropriate resources and capacity, a balance that is evidently lacking in Ward 68.

The findings demonstrate that the absence of sustained, context-specific capacity-building for Ward Committee members in Ward 68 significantly undermines both their functional effectiveness and their ethical legitimacy. The reliance on a single, generic induction workshop fails to equip committee members with the competencies required for meaningful participation and ethical decision-making. This training gap reflects broader institutional shortcomings in supporting participatory governance and highlights the ethical risks of treating participation as a procedural formality rather than a substantive democratic commitment. Addressing these gaps requires a shift toward continuous, ward-specific training models that recognise the moral responsibilities of both municipalities and ward committees in fostering inclusive, accountable, and responsive local governance.

### **Committee Composition, Inclusivity, and Moral Representation**

The composition of the Ward 68 committee reflects a combination of positive attributes and notable ethical shortcomings, particularly when assessed through the lens of inclusive and morally grounded participatory governance. Participants in this study highlighted that diversity in age and gender contributed meaningfully to the committee's deliberative processes. At the same time, the absence of representation for persons with disabilities exposed significant ethical gaps that undermine the committee's claim to inclusivity and moral legitimacy. These findings suggest that while formal representational criteria may have been partially met, substantive inclusivity remains uneven and incomplete.

Participants reported that the presence of both younger members (18–55 years) and older members (35–55 years) “enriched the decision-making process” and fostered a more egalitarian approach to governance. Age diversity was perceived as beneficial because it allowed for the integration of different perspectives, experiences, and priorities. Younger members were often associated with energy, innovation, and familiarity with contemporary social challenges, while older members contributed institutional memory, lived experience, and a deeper understanding of historical community dynamics. From an ethical governance perspective, such intergenerational representation strengthens deliberative quality by ensuring that decisions reflect both present needs and long-term considerations.

Gender representation within the committee was also identified as a positive aspect of its composition. With “seven females and three males,” participants regarded the committee as gender-diverse and inclusive (Mohlala, 2024). This gender balance was seen as enhancing fairness and representation, particularly in a governance context where women's voices have historically been marginalised. Ethical policy frameworks emphasise gender equity as a core component of social justice and democratic legitimacy, and the presence of women in decision-making roles contributes to more comprehensive and responsive governance outcomes. The findings suggest that gender diversity within the Ward 68 committee supported broader perspectives on community issues, particularly those affecting women, children, and vulnerable households.

However, despite these positive dimensions, the committee's composition revealed a critical ethical deficiency: the complete absence of individuals with visible disabilities. This exclusion represents a significant gap in moral representation and raises serious questions about procedural justice and equity in participatory governance structures. Persons with disabilities constitute an important segment of the community and often experience unique barriers in accessing public services, participating in decision-making processes, and benefiting from development initiatives. Their exclusion from ward committee structures therefore limits the committee's ability to fully understand and respond to the diverse needs of the community.

The lack of disability inclusion represents a missed opportunity to incorporate diverse lived experiences into decision-making processes, which could otherwise enhance both the quality and legitimacy of governance outcomes (Mohlala, 2024). Inclusive governance is not merely about numerical representation but about ensuring that decision-making structures reflect the full spectrum of social realities within a community. From an ethical standpoint, exclusion—whether intentional or structural—undermines the principle of equal moral worth and challenges the legitimacy of participatory institutions that claim to represent “the community” as a whole.

This absence also highlights deeper systemic issues related to access, awareness, and institutional design. Individuals with disabilities may face physical, informational, or social barriers that prevent them from participating in ward committee elections or being nominated for such roles. Ethical governance requires proactive measures to identify and dismantle these barriers, rather than relying on passive notions of inclusion. Without deliberate strategies to promote disability representation, participatory structures risk reproducing existing inequalities and reinforcing patterns of marginalisation.

The uneven nature of inclusivity observed in Ward 68 underscores the distinction between formal inclusion and substantive inclusion. While gender and age diversity may satisfy certain representational benchmarks, the exclusion of persons with disabilities reveals limitations in the ethical depth of participatory practices. Procedural justice requires that all community members have a fair opportunity to participate in decision-making processes, while distributive justice demands that governance outcomes address the needs of the most marginalised. The findings suggest that Ward 68's committee structure partially fulfils these ethical requirements but falls short of achieving comprehensive moral representation.

Furthermore, the absence of disability representation has implications for trust and legitimacy. Communities are more likely to trust and engage with governance structures that they perceive as inclusive and representative of their lived realities. When certain groups are visibly excluded, perceptions of bias or neglect may emerge, potentially undermining confidence in ward committees as vehicles for community engagement. Moral legitimacy in participatory governance is therefore closely tied to the perceived fairness and inclusiveness of representational structures.

The findings also suggest that inclusivity should be understood as a dynamic and evolving ethical obligation rather than a static achievement. Demographic representation alone does not guarantee ethical governance; rather, it must be accompanied by continuous reflection on who is included, who is excluded, and why. In the context of Ward 68, while progress has been made in terms of gender balance and age diversity, the absence of persons with disabilities indicates the need for more deliberate and reflective approaches to inclusion.

From a policy perspective, this gap highlights the importance of capacity-building initiatives that address not only skills and knowledge but also ethical awareness and representational responsibilities. Ward committee members and municipal officials alike require training that emphasises the moral dimensions of inclusion, equity, and representation. Such training could foster greater sensitivity to the needs of marginalised groups and encourage proactive efforts to broaden participation in governance structures.

In addition, institutional frameworks governing the selection and composition of ward committees should be reviewed through an ethical lens to ensure that they promote substantive inclusivity. This may involve revisiting nomination processes, accessibility requirements, and support mechanisms for underrepresented groups. Ethical policy-making demands that governance structures do not merely reflect existing power relations but actively work to transform them in the pursuit of social justice.

The composition of the Ward 68 committee illustrates both the potential and the limitations of



participatory governance in practice. While age and gender diversity have contributed positively to decision-making and inclusivity, the exclusion of individuals with disabilities reveals significant ethical shortcomings. This uneven inclusivity raises important questions about procedural justice, equity, and moral representation within ward committees. Addressing these gaps requires a more comprehensive and ethically informed approach to committee composition—one that recognises inclusivity as a foundational moral principle rather than an optional or symbolic gesture. By strengthening representational diversity in all its forms, ward committees can enhance their legitimacy, effectiveness, and ethical standing as instruments of democratic local governance.

### **Uneven Experiences of Capacity-Building Initiatives**

The findings reveal that participants' experiences of capacity-building initiatives were highly uneven, reflecting broader institutional inconsistency and a lack of coherent policy implementation. Although all respondents reported attending an induction workshop at the beginning of their term, most struggled to recall any substantive content or subsequent training activities. This unevenness suggests that capacity-building was neither systematic nor sustained, thereby undermining the effectiveness of ward committees and raising ethical concerns about the municipality's commitment to participatory governance.

Respondent 6's reflection that "We did receive an induction once. Perhaps it ought to be carried out once a year to remind and rejuvenate us" illustrates both recognition of the value of training and frustration with its insufficiency. This statement highlights an implicit understanding among ward committee members that governance responsibilities require continuous learning and reinforcement. From an ethical policy perspective, governance actors are expected not only to be appointed or elected but also to be supported in a manner that enables them to act competently, responsibly, and transparently. The absence of refresher training therefore represents a failure to uphold this ethical obligation.

The lack of recall regarding induction content further points to deficiencies in training design and delivery. Training that is not retained or applied in practice cannot meaningfully enhance capacity or improve governance outcomes. This raises questions about whether the induction was designed to empower ward committee members or merely to satisfy procedural requirements. Ethical governance requires that training initiatives be purpose-driven and learner-centred, ensuring that participants can translate knowledge into practice. In Ward 68, however, the one-off nature of the induction limited its impact and failed to create lasting institutional knowledge.

The confusion between formal capacity-building initiatives and unrelated workshops further underscores the absence of structured and role-specific training. Respondent 4's statement that "training ... was part of the workshop that was in Gatheshe, was with JMPD..." (December, 2023) suggests that ward committee members often interpret any form of engagement with municipal institutions as training. This conflation reflects a lack of clarity about what constitutes official capacity-building and indicates that training objectives were not clearly communicated. From an ethical standpoint, such ambiguity undermines informed participation and weakens accountability, as committee members cannot be expected to fulfil responsibilities for which they have not been properly prepared.

The uneven experiences reported by participants also reveal disparities in access to institutional support. While some members recalled attending the induction, others had limited exposure to any form of training beyond incidental interactions with municipal departments. This inconsistency raises ethical concerns related to fairness and equity within participatory governance structures. Ethical policy frameworks emphasise equal access to resources and opportunities, particularly for those entrusted with representing community interests. When training provision varies without clear justification, it risks privileging some committee members over others and undermining collective effectiveness.

Consistent with Millen (2001), the findings suggest that capacity-building without follow-up support and reinforcement is unlikely to produce meaningful or sustained improvements in performance. Capacity-building is not a discrete event but an ongoing process that requires continuous engagement, mentoring, and evaluation. Ethical governance depends on the development of competencies over time, particularly in complex environments where community needs, policy frameworks, and institutional arrangements are constantly evolving. In the absence of follow-up training, ward committee members are left to navigate these complexities independently, often relying on personal

initiative rather than institutional guidance.

The lack of structured capacity-building also has implications for role clarity and moral responsibility. Ward committee members are expected to serve as intermediaries between communities and municipalities, a role that involves managing expectations, conveying information accurately, and advocating for community needs. Without adequate training, members may unintentionally misrepresent municipal processes or raise unrealistic expectations among residents. Such outcomes can erode trust and undermine the moral legitimacy of participatory governance structures. Ethical governance requires not only good intentions but also the competence to act responsibly and truthfully in interactions with the public.

Furthermore, the uneven nature of capacity-building experiences reflects broader institutional weaknesses in policy implementation. While legislative and policy frameworks may prescribe training and support for ward committees, the findings suggest that implementation is fragmented and inconsistent. This gap between policy intent and practice raises ethical questions about accountability within municipal governance. When institutions fail to translate policy commitments into concrete action, they compromise the moral integrity of governance systems and weaken public confidence in democratic processes.

The reliance on induction-only training also fails to account for the evolving nature of ward committee roles. Governance challenges are dynamic, shaped by changes in service delivery priorities, political contexts, and community needs. Ethical policy-making requires adaptive learning structures that enable governance actors to respond to emerging issues effectively. The absence of such structures in Ward 68 limited the committee's ability to engage meaningfully with complex challenges, such as housing disputes, service delivery delays, and community conflict.

In addition, the lack of ongoing capacity-building places an ethical burden on ward committee members themselves. As community representatives, they are expected to perform demanding roles with limited compensation and minimal institutional support. This imbalance raises concerns about distributive justice, as responsibility is devolved without corresponding investment in capacity development. Ethical governance requires that individuals entrusted with public responsibilities be adequately supported to prevent burnout, frustration, and disengagement.

The findings also suggest that uneven capacity-building experiences may contribute to internal disparities within ward committees. Members with greater personal experience, education, or informal networks may be better equipped to navigate governance processes, while others remain marginalised within the committee. Such disparities can weaken collective decision-making and undermine the principle of shared responsibility. Ethical participatory governance depends on collective capacity, not individual resilience, underscoring the importance of systematic and inclusive training initiatives.

The uneven experiences of capacity-building initiatives among Ward 68 committee members highlight significant institutional shortcomings in the support of participatory governance. The reliance on a single induction workshop, coupled with the absence of structured follow-up training, resulted in confusion, limited skill retention, and inconsistent preparedness among committee members. These findings reinforce Millen's (2001) assertion that capacity-building without reinforcement is ineffective and ethically insufficient. Addressing these challenges requires a shift toward continuous, role-specific, and context-sensitive capacity-building models that recognise the moral responsibilities of municipalities to support ward committees as key actors in democratic local governance.

### **Trust, Relationships, and Ethical Dimensions of Service Delivery**

The findings of this study demonstrate that trust, communication, and ethical responsiveness are central yet fragile elements of community engagement in Johannesburg's Ward 68. Ward committees are positioned as intermediaries between communities and municipal institutions, a role that inherently relies on trust-based relationships. However, the results indicate that these relationships are strained by unmet expectations, limited institutional support, and systemic weaknesses in service delivery. These challenges have significant ethical implications for participatory governance, as trust constitutes a moral foundation upon which democratic engagement and legitimacy are built.

Respondents reported that community members often approach ward committee members with the expectation that they will resolve complex and deeply rooted issues, particularly those related to housing and service delivery. As Respondent 6 explained, "People believe that when they come to me,

their housing-related issues will be resolved... if I do not understand the problem, I will escalate it.” This statement reflects both the high level of trust initially placed in ward committees and the moral burden associated with representing community interests. From an ethical perspective, such expectations underscore the perceived role of ward committees as agents of justice and responsiveness within local governance structures. However, when committee members lack the knowledge, authority, or institutional backing to address these concerns effectively, trust becomes vulnerable to erosion.

Limited knowledge and inadequate capacity-building were found to constrain the ability of ward committee members to manage community expectations responsibly. Without sufficient training, members may struggle to clearly explain municipal processes, timelines, and limitations, leading to misunderstandings and frustration among residents. Ethical governance requires transparency and honesty in interactions with the public, particularly when dealing with sensitive issues such as housing. When ward committee members are unable to provide accurate information or timely feedback, communities may perceive them as ineffective or untrustworthy, even when failures stem from systemic constraints rather than individual negligence.

The findings further reveal that weak institutional support and poor communication channels significantly undermine trust between ward committees, communities, and municipal authorities. Although the induction workshop exposed ward committee members to various municipal departments, respondents noted that no practical contact details or clear communication protocols were provided. As a result, committee members were often compelled to “open doors for myself without any assistance from the municipality.” This lack of institutional support places ward committees in ethically precarious positions, as they are expected to facilitate service delivery without access to the resources or networks required to do so effectively.

Distrust toward municipal institutions emerged as a recurring theme in participants’ narratives. Respondent 4 expressed profound scepticism, stating, “You cannot trust the officials... especially the SAPS... they will come back and give information to that person.” This perception of untrustworthy behaviour by officials reflects broader concerns about confidentiality, accountability, and fairness in service delivery. When communities perceive municipal institutions as unreliable or biased, ward committees are often caught in the middle, bearing the consequences of institutional failures over which they have little control. This dynamic further complicates their ethical role as intermediaries and weakens their capacity to foster constructive relationships.

Trust is not only a relational concept but also a moral one, grounded in expectations of integrity, competence, and goodwill. In the context of Ward 68, the erosion of trust appears to be linked to repeated experiences of unmet expectations, delayed service delivery, and opaque decision-making processes. Ethical governance requires that public institutions act in ways that are predictable, transparent, and responsive to citizen needs. When these conditions are absent, trust deteriorates, and participatory structures such as ward committees struggle to maintain legitimacy.

The findings also suggest that strained relationships and low levels of trust contribute to perceptions of inequitable access to services. Communities that feel marginalised or neglected may view ward committees as ineffective or complicit in institutional shortcomings. Such perceptions can discourage participation in public forums and weaken the social fabric necessary for collective problem-solving. From an ethical standpoint, inequitable access to services raises concerns about justice and fairness, particularly in contexts characterised by socio-economic disparities and historical marginalisation.

Moreover, the burden of mediating trust-related challenges often falls disproportionately on ward committee members. As community representatives, they are expected to absorb frustration, manage conflict, and advocate for residents, frequently without adequate support or authority. This situation raises ethical questions about the fairness of devolving responsibility without corresponding empowerment. Ethical policy-making demands that those tasked with representing public interests be provided with the tools and institutional backing necessary to fulfil their roles effectively and without undue personal cost.

The findings further highlight the cyclical nature of trust and service delivery. When ward committees are unable to facilitate timely or effective responses to community concerns, trust declines. As trust diminishes, community engagement weakens, making it more difficult for ward committees to mobilise residents and gather input for decision-making processes. This cycle undermines the very

purpose of participatory governance and reinforces scepticism toward democratic institutions. Breaking this cycle requires not only technical improvements in service delivery but also deliberate efforts to rebuild trust through ethical leadership, transparency, and consistent communication.

Ethical responsiveness in service delivery also involves recognising and managing the limits of ward committee authority. Clear communication about what ward committees can and cannot do is essential to maintaining trust. When boundaries are unclear, communities may develop unrealistic expectations, leading to disappointment and disengagement. Training programmes that emphasise ethical communication, expectation management, and conflict resolution could strengthen the capacity of ward committee members to navigate these challenges more effectively.

In addition, the findings suggest that trust-building is a shared moral responsibility that extends beyond ward committees to municipal institutions and officials. While ward committees serve as visible points of contact, they cannot compensate for systemic failures in service delivery or governance. Ethical governance requires alignment between participatory structures and institutional practices, ensuring that commitments made at the community level are supported by responsive administrative systems.

The findings reveal that trust, relationships, and ethical responsiveness are deeply interconnected and central to effective community engagement in Ward 68. While ward committees are entrusted with fostering dialogue and representing community interests, their efforts are constrained by limited knowledge, weak institutional support, and pervasive distrust toward municipal institutions. These conditions undermine the ethical foundations of participatory governance, resulting in strained relationships, reduced trust, and perceptions of inequitable service delivery. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that strengthens capacity-building, improves communication channels, and reinforces the moral responsibilities of municipalities to support ward committees as key actors in democratic local governance.

### **Structural Challenges, Resource Constraints, and Moral Accountability**

The findings of this study indicate that structural challenges and resource constraints significantly compromise the effectiveness of Ward Committees in Johannesburg's Ward 68, with far-reaching implications for moral accountability in local governance. While ward committees are institutionally designed to promote participatory democracy and facilitate communication between communities and municipalities, the results suggest that weaknesses in governance structures, unclear lines of authority, and insufficient material support undermine their ability to fulfil this mandate ethically and effectively.

One of the most prominent structural challenges identified by participants relates to fragmented and unclear reporting structures. Respondent 1 highlighted confusion arising from the existence of multiple governance layers, stating that "the ward committees report to the ward governance... and the ward councillor does not report to the ward committees." This lack of clarity creates ambiguity regarding authority, responsibility, and accountability, weakening coordination between ward committees and elected officials. From an ethical governance perspective, clearly defined roles and reporting lines are essential to ensure transparency, accountability, and mutual responsibility. When such clarity is absent, governance structures become prone to inefficiency, blame-shifting, and erosion of trust.

The fragmentation of authority also undermines the moral accountability of governance actors. Ward committees are expected to represent community interests and provide feedback to municipal structures, yet they lack the authority to hold councillors or officials accountable for decisions and service delivery outcomes. This imbalance creates a moral dilemma in which ward committee members bear responsibility without corresponding power. Ethical public policy requires alignment between responsibility and authority; when individuals or structures are tasked with representing community interests but lack decision-making power, their capacity to act responsibly is severely constrained.

Financial constraints emerged as another critical challenge affecting ward committee performance. Respondents consistently described the monthly stipend of R1,000 as insufficient to meet the demands of their role. As Respondent 6 explained, "Our stipend is too small. I occasionally must visit each of these locations to deal with housing-related difficulties." This statement illustrates the practical and moral implications of inadequate remuneration. Ward committee members are expected to engage with communities across geographically dispersed areas, often using personal resources to fulfil their duties. From an ethical standpoint, this situation raises concerns about fairness and distributive justice, as individuals entrusted with public responsibilities are required to subsidise governance functions from

their own limited means.

Inadequate financial support not only affects the material well-being of ward committee members but also influences their capacity to engage consistently and effectively with communities. Limited resources may restrict mobility, reduce availability, and contribute to fatigue and disengagement. Ethical governance demands that participatory structures be adequately resourced to ensure that representation is not merely symbolic but substantively effective. When stipends are insufficient, participation risks becoming exclusionary, as only those with alternative means of support can afford to remain actively involved.

The findings also highlight frustration with unresponsive municipal officials as a significant barrier to effective service delivery and moral accountability. Respondent 2 observed that persistent delays in addressing service delivery issues often required escalation to oversight bodies such as the Office of the Ombudsman. This reliance on external mechanisms reflects a breakdown in routine administrative responsiveness and weakens confidence in municipal accountability systems. Ethical governance relies on timely and responsive action by public officials, particularly when addressing issues that directly affect citizens' quality of life. When officials are perceived as unresponsive or indifferent, trust in governance institutions deteriorates, and participatory mechanisms lose credibility.

The need to escalate issues beyond routine administrative channels places additional burdens on ward committees, reinforcing perceptions of inefficiency and powerlessness. As intermediaries, ward committee members are often blamed by communities for delays or failures in service delivery, even when these outcomes result from institutional shortcomings beyond their control. This dynamic raises ethical concerns about scapegoating and misplaced accountability, as responsibility is devolved without adequate support or authority.

The findings corroborate earlier studies that identified unclear roles, insufficient stipends, and weak institutional support as persistent challenges facing ward committees (Mnqayi, 2021; Qwabe & Mdaka, 2011). The consistency of these findings across different contexts suggests that structural and resource-related challenges are systemic rather than incidental. From a moral policy perspective, systemic failures demand systemic solutions, including institutional reform, clearer governance frameworks, and sustained investment in participatory structures.

Structural challenges also affect the legitimacy of ward committees in the eyes of the communities they serve. When committees are perceived as ineffective or powerless, community members may question their value as representative structures. This perception undermines the moral authority of ward committees and discourages citizen participation, weakening the democratic fabric of local governance. Ethical participatory governance depends on the credibility of representative institutions, which in turn requires visible impact and responsiveness.

Moreover, resource constraints and structural ambiguities may create conditions conducive to political interference and favouritism. When resources are scarce and authority is unclear, decisions about support, recognition, or access to officials may become politicised. This undermines the ethical principles of fairness, impartiality, and transparency that should guide public administration. Although this study does not introduce new evidence on political interference, the structural vulnerabilities identified create fertile ground for such practices, further complicating moral accountability.

The findings also suggest that moral accountability in local governance cannot be understood solely in terms of individual behaviour. While ward committee members are expected to act ethically and responsibly, their capacity to do so is shaped by institutional arrangements and resource allocations. Ethical governance therefore requires a collective approach to accountability, recognising the responsibilities of municipalities, officials, and political leaders to create enabling environments for participatory structures.

Addressing structural and resource-related challenges requires more than incremental adjustments; it demands a reorientation of governance priorities toward ethical support for participation. This includes clarifying reporting lines, redefining roles, and ensuring that ward committees are integrated meaningfully into decision-making processes. Adequate remuneration and logistical support are equally important to ensure that participation is accessible, sustainable, and fair.

The findings demonstrate that structural challenges and resource constraints significantly undermine the effectiveness and moral accountability of Ward Committees in Ward 68. Fragmented reporting structures, insufficient stipends, and unresponsive municipal systems weaken coordination,

erode trust, and place undue burdens on community representatives. These conditions compromise the ethical foundations of participatory governance by misaligning responsibility, authority, and support. Consistent with previous studies (Mnqayi, 2021; Qwabe & Mdaka, 2011), the results highlight the need for institutional reforms and sustained investment to strengthen ward committees as ethically grounded and effective instruments of democratic local governance.

### Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the findings of this study reveal a coherent pattern of systemic and ethical challenges that collectively undermine the effectiveness of Ward Committees in Johannesburg's Ward 68. At the core of these challenges lies the absence of sustained, contextualised capacity-building beyond a one-time, generic induction workshop—an intervention that participants frequently struggled to recall. This deficiency significantly constrains the ability of ward committees to fulfil their ethical and democratic responsibilities in facilitating meaningful community engagement and participatory governance. Rather than empowering ward committee members as informed and morally accountable representatives, the prevailing training model reduces participation to a procedural exercise with limited substantive impact.

The lack of continuous and ward-specific capacity-building emerges as a central theme linking many of the study's findings. Without ongoing training and institutional support, ward committee members are inadequately equipped to navigate complex governance processes, manage community expectations, or communicate effectively with municipal authorities. This shortfall compromises not only technical competence but also ethical responsiveness, as committee members are unable to act with the clarity, confidence, and accountability required in their intermediary role. The reliance on a standardised induction model fails to recognise the dynamic and context-dependent nature of local governance, thereby weakening the moral foundations of participatory democracy.

Structural challenges further exacerbate these capacity gaps. Ambiguous reporting lines and fragmented governance arrangements create confusion regarding authority and accountability, diminishing coordination between ward committees, ward councillors, and municipal officials. These structural weaknesses undermine ethical accountability by blurring responsibility and limiting the ability of ward committees to advocate effectively for community interests. When representatives lack both authority and institutional backing, they are placed in ethically precarious positions—expected to deliver outcomes without the means to do so. This misalignment between responsibility and power erodes trust and undermines the legitimacy of participatory governance structures.

Resource constraints, particularly inadequate financial support, also play a critical role in shaping ward committee effectiveness. The insufficiency of stipends places additional burdens on committee members, many of whom must use personal resources to perform their duties. From an ethical perspective, this raises concerns about fairness and distributive justice, as participation becomes contingent on personal capacity rather than collective responsibility. Such conditions risk excluding individuals who cannot afford to subsidise governance functions, thereby reinforcing inequality and weakening the inclusivity of participatory mechanisms.

Trust emerges as a cross-cutting ethical issue that both influences and is influenced by capacity-building, structural arrangements, and service delivery outcomes. The findings indicate uneven and fragile trust relationships among communities, ward committees, and municipal authorities. Limited knowledge, poor communication channels, and unresponsive institutions contribute to unmet expectations and growing scepticism toward governance processes. As trust deteriorates, community participation declines, creating a feedback loop that further weakens ward committee effectiveness. Trust, therefore, functions not only as a relational asset but also as a moral currency essential for sustaining democratic engagement.

The composition of ward committees reveals a mixed picture of inclusivity and moral representation. While progress has been made in achieving gender balance and age diversity—contributing positively to decision-making and egalitarian governance—the persistent absence of persons with disabilities highlights ongoing ethical shortcomings. This exclusion underscores the difference between formal representation and substantive inclusivity. Ethical participatory governance requires deliberate efforts to include marginalised voices, particularly those whose lived experiences can inform more equitable policy outcomes. The lack of disability representation limits the moral legitimacy of ward committees and constrains their capacity to fully represent community diversity.



Taken together, the findings demonstrate that the limitations of a standardised, one-size-fits-all training model extend beyond technical inefficiencies to encompass deeper ethical and moral concerns. The failure to provide continuous, context-sensitive capacity-building undermines ward committees' ability to act as effective, accountable, and inclusive representatives. Structural ambiguities, resource constraints, and weak institutional responsiveness further compound these challenges, creating an environment in which participatory governance is formally present but substantively fragile.

The synthesis of findings underscores the need for a holistic rethinking of ward committee support mechanisms. Continuous, ward-specific capacity-building must be complemented by structural reforms that clarify roles, strengthen accountability, and ensure adequate resourcing. Equally important is the need to foreground ethical considerations—such as fairness, inclusivity, trust, and moral responsibility—in the design and implementation of participatory governance frameworks. By addressing these interconnected challenges, municipalities can strengthen the ethical effectiveness of ward committees, rebuild public trust, and move closer to the ideals of democratic local governance envisioned in policy and legislation.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that significant ethical and structural shortcomings undermine the effectiveness of Ward Committees in Johannesburg's Ward 68. Capacity-building efforts were limited to a one-time, generic induction that failed to address the ward's contextual challenges, leaving committee members ill-equipped to facilitate meaningful community engagement. The absence of continuous training, coupled with ambiguous reporting lines, inadequate financial support, and political interference, weakened institutional accountability and compromised the ethical foundations of participatory governance. Uneven trust between communities, ward committees, and municipal authorities further constrained service delivery and public participation, while persistent gaps in disability representation highlighted unresolved issues of inclusivity and procedural justice despite progress in gender balance. Although ward committees hold potential as vehicles for democratic local governance, their effectiveness remains constrained by misaligned support structures, underscoring the urgent need for ethically informed, ward-specific capacity-building and structural reforms to strengthen trust, accountability, and inclusive participation at the local level.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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