

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION ON LABOUR UNREST IN A SOUTH AFRICAN MINING ORGANISATION

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Abstract

South Africa is faced with the challenge of frequent, lengthy, and violent strikes, especially in the mining sector. It is argued that the challenge of labour unrest can be addressed through meaningful employee participation in decision-making. The main objective of this research was to explore whether poor employee participation in decision-making contributes to labour unrest in the South African mining sector. To be precise, mineworkers frequently engage in violent strikes that negatively impact mining organisations, their employees, the economy, and mining communities. A qualitative research approach was employed using semi-structured interviews to collect data from employees who occupy low levels in a mining organisation. The findings show that poor employee participation in decision-making in the South African mining sector contributes to labour unrest. A positive relationship between poor employee participation and labour unrest is established; therefore, the mining management should implement corrective measures to ensure meaningful employee participation in decision-making that significantly reduces strike

action. The research highlighted the issue of poor employee participation in decision-making and the impact on labour unrest.

Keywords: *employee participation, labour unrest, harmonious employment relations, strike*

JEL Classification: *J28, J53*

Introduction

Labour Relations in South Africa remain challenged by the number and severity of occurring strikes, and there is no clear indication that the number of strikes is decreasing (Labour Annual Report, 2018). For many years South Africa has witnessed long and violent strikes in the mining industry that have resulted in property damage, injury, and death (Labour Annual Report, 2018; Makhubedu, Nwobodo-Anyadiiegwu & Mbohwa, 2017). One of the significant labour unrest incidents that left the country in a state of shock was the Marikana massacre in August 2012 at a Platinum mine in Rustenburg (Samuel, 2016). It is the worst incident because of the shooting and killing of 34 mineworkers during the strike (Samuel, 2016). The frequent occurrence of labour unrest in the mining sector is a significant concern because the mining sector is a driving force in shaping the country's socio-political and cultural development (Horne, 2015; Mineral Resources, 2017). Mining organisations suffer significant financial losses during periods of labour unrest, which negatively impacts the economy, as the mining sector plays a crucial role in the economy of South Africa (Leon, 2012; Tenza, 2020).

Furthermore, violent strikes negatively impact employment, business confidence and investment opportunities, affecting any chances of economic growth (Tenza, 2020). The failure to reduce the number and intensity of strikes will severely affect 'people's lives as employment opportunities will be lost, and poverty will result (Tenza, 2020). Therefore, due to the labour unrest pandemic, the South African government has instructed social partners to develop ways to reduce the number of strikes (Labour Annual Report, 2018).

Problem statement

There is an existing research literature on employee participation and labour unrest, but there is a dearth of research to understand the issue of employee participation and labour unrest in the South African mining sector. Frequent,

lengthy, and violent strikes are challenging in the South African Mining Sectors (Makhubedu *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, in SA, meaningful employee participation is still in the early stages (Venter & Levy 2014). Tchapchet (2013) posits that this is due to a lack of management, trade union and employee commitment. Therefore, in-depth analysis and understanding of whether poor employee participation in decision-making influences labour unrest remains an area for research. The problem statement is: To what extent does poor employee participation in decision-making influence labour unrest in the South African mining sector?

Research questions

The primary research question is:

How and to what extent does the lack of meaningful employee participation in decision-making influence labour unrest in the South African mining sector?

Research aim

The research aim is to explore whether poor employee participation in decision-making contributes to labour unrest in the South African mining sector.

Research objectives

Four research objectives have been identified, which are:

- To explore theories of rational choice, pluralistic, unitary, conflict, and human relations.
- To understand labour unrest and employee participation in decision-making.
- To explore the lived experiences of mining workers in order to identify how employee participation influences labour unrest.
- To recommend mechanisms to improve employee participation.

Literature review

Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (2006) explain that a literature review is a detailed evaluation of existing information and studies conducted to gain more insight into the field of interest. The existing literature will be presented and reviewed under the following topics: the Human Relations Theory, the conceptualisation of labour unrest and employee participation, the historical background and overview of labour unrest in the South African mining sector, the process of employee participation in decision-making and linking labour unrest and employee participation.

The Human Relations Theory

According to Cooley (2016), the Human Relations theory is divided into three elements. The first element takes into account the importance of an employee. It recognises employees' values and explains their responsiveness to their environment (Cooley, 2016). The second element acknowledges that employee relationships influence an organisation's effectiveness (Cooley, 2016). The third element emphasises the importance of participative management (Cooley, 2016). The Human Relations Theory moves away from the perception that employees only respond to financial incentives (Omodan *et al.*, 2020). The theory explains that money is not a prime concern for employees in an organisation but rather their involvement in critical decision-making (Omodan *et al.*, 2020). Previous studies have focused on monetary factors that contribute to labour unrest but have overlooked that sense of involvement can also contribute to labour unrest. (Kennedy, 2018) also noted that wage disputes are a major contributing factor to labour unrest in the South African mining sector, but it is not the only factor influencing labour unrest.

Conceptualising labour unrest and employee participation

According to Grogan (2014), labour unrest can be expressed in various forms, such as strikes, lockouts, picketing, protest action and boycott. However, for the purpose of this research, the focus will be on strikes since they have been identified as a significant problem. Section 213 of the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 (LRA) stipulates that a strike means "the partial or complete concerted refusal to work, or retardation or obstruction of work, by persons who are or have been employed by the same employer or different employers, for the purpose to remedy a grievance or resolving a dispute in respect of any matter of mutual interest between the employer and employee, and every reference to work in this definition includes overtime work, whether is it voluntary or compulsory". Strikes are deemed as an action undertaken by trade unions or employees as individuals to remedy their grievances and dissatisfactions (Taylor, 2017). Employee participation involves employees, either individuals or groups, providing their input on decisions that affect how the organisation operates (Venter & Levy, 2014). Employee involvement, empowerment, workers' voice, and co-decision-making are all classified under the umbrella concept of employee participation (De Kok, 2021). According to Venter and Levy (2014), a harmonious working environment is established through employee participation.

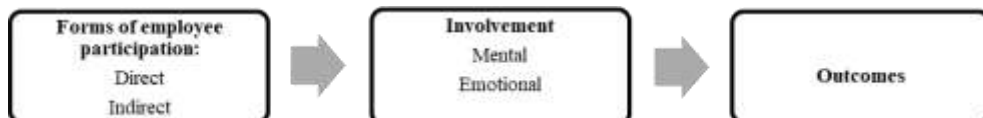
The historical background and overview of labour unrest in the South African mining sector

It is significant to have a historical perspective of the challenges facing the South African mining sector (Bhoola, 2011; Makhubedu *et al.*, 2017). Notably, the underlying issue of labour unrest in the South African mining sector is not new, as it dates back to the early nineteenth century when black mineworkers engaged in strike action for higher wages and removed the colour bar act (Budeli, 2009). In 1912, the mine management decided to reduce minimum wages and exonerate themselves from providing contact miners with appropriate facilities (Moodie, 2013). According to Moodie (2013), many of mine workers could not come to terms with the decision. The unilateral decision made by management led to the 1913 strike that occurred in Kleinfontein (Moodie, 2013). This strike is known as the general strike because a violent crowd, including women and children, came out in numbers to support miners. Yu and Roos (2018) state that it is well-known that strike actions increased rapidly during the '1980's. More specifically, statistics have revealed that the South African working environment is strike prone and strike actions have become more violent post-1994 (Madlala & Govender, 2018). Recognised mine industry trade unions led the latest strike at Sibanye Stillwater in 2022, that is, the Association of Mines Construction Union (AMCU) and the National Unions of Mineworkers (NUM) (Sotaddard, 2022). According to the Industrial Action Report (2019), there has been an increase in the number of unprotected strikes over the past years. The Industrial Action Report (2019) reports that in 2019, a total of 157 strikes occurred, where 65% of the strikes were unprotected, and 35% were protected. It is essential to consider that statistics covered in the Industrial Action Report have been brought to the Department of Employment and Labour; this implies that strikes that occur on a smaller scale are overlooked (Industrial Action Report, 2019). Bavu (2015) states that in 2012, numerous unprotected strikes were witnessed in the South African mining sector: the Marikana, The Anglo-Ashanti Gold, Anglo Platinum (Amplats) and Coal Mining strike.

The process of employee participation

Figure 1 shows what the process of employee participation entails and further elaborates that there is both mental and emotional involvement in employee participation (Iranwanto, 2015; Davis & Newstroom, 1997). Mitonga-Monga, Coetzee and Cilliers (2012) concur that employee participation is not a physical activity but a mental and emotional involvement process.

Figure 1: The employee participation process



Source: Finnemore (2018); Davis & Newstroom (1997); Iranwanto (2015)

Two primary forms of employee participation are direct and indirect (Shaed *et al.*, 2018). According to Shaed *et al.* (2018); Keller and Werner (2012), direct employee participation occurs when employees have input in all decisions that are made. According to Lester (2014), direct participation does not exist in the South African mining sector. Indirect participation occurs through employee representatives, namely trade unions (Ekwoaba, Ufodiama, & Enyinnaya, 2019).

Indirect participation through registered and recognised trade unions in the South African mining sector

Shortfalls of trade unions have led to a decline in union membership in the South African mining sector over the past ten years (Makhubedu *et al.*, 2017). According to the Trade Unions Subsector Skills Plan (2021), 47% of trade union membership in 1990 decreased to 28% in 2017. The shortfalls of the NUM and AMCU, in particular, since they have been identified as a trade union representing most of the mining sector employees. According to Dhliwayo (2012), NUM does not serve its purpose of furthering the interests of the employees, but rather it is an instrument used to acquire powerful positions in the government and Mining companies. Lester (2014) has further established that NUM is accused of selling out its constituents. Lester, 2014) has identified inconsistencies within the union. NUM successfully negotiated with Implats better-working conditions for rock drill operators that placed them above the industry level but failed to negotiate similar conditions for employees at Lonmin mine (Madlala & Govender, 2018). In 2012, more than 12000 employees from four Anglo Platinum (Amplats) were enraged by the conduct of NUM, which led to a violent movement in NUM offices to withdraw their membership. According to Patron (2013), 2012 will be the year with the highest number of illegal strikes. According to Botiveau (2018), AMCU led the movement as its objective was to gain momentum in its struggle against NUM as it is dominant in the South African mining sector. According to (Pitzer, 2018), the ongoing battle between the two essential trade unions negatively

influences labour unrest as peace is disrupted. Harvey (2013) suggests that a harsh sanction of removing bargaining rights must be imposed on a trade that perpetuates illegal strikes.

Positive outcomes of employee participation

Employee commitment: Lomo (2017) proposes that management can implement employee participation as a strategy to increase organisational commitment. The continuous engagement of management with employees to discuss the state of the organisation and include them in the decision-making process increases the 'employees' understanding and acceptance of decisions (Wilkinson & Dundon, 2010; Lomo, 2017). Furthermore, the 'employees' sense of responsibility is increased towards outcomes of these decisions, and the organisation's fate is easily accepted when the management shows genuine concern regarding the employees' inputs and encourages them to participate and influence decisions (Lomo, 2017). Additionally, a sense of psychological ownership and attachment is formed towards the organisation (Lomo, 2017).

Employee involvement and organisational effectiveness: Amah & Ahiauzu (2013) suggest that employee involvement is a mechanism used to improve employee attitudes and organisational effectiveness. Organisational effectiveness refers to the approach an organisation undertakes to achieve the goals it has set for itself (Holbeche, 2016). It considers suggestions of what needs to be done for the organisation to achieve its desired results (Holbeche, 2016). According to Dede (2019), employee involvement is crucial for achieving organisational effectiveness and generating positive employee perceptions. Employee involvement refers to practices an organisation implements to give employees input and actively participate in decision-making (Holbeche, 2016). Employee involvement contributes significantly towards creating an 'organisation's united vision, purpose, and values (Amah & Ahiauzu, 2013). When employees actively participate in decision-making, the organisation is more likely to avoid negative aspects such as lack of employee commitment, agitation, and misconception. As a result, employee productivity should increase (Dede, 2019). Poor employee participation stops an organisation from producing the results needed (Dede, 2019). Ineffective employee participation may lead to dissatisfaction, which in turn could result in labour unrest. Ferreira (2004) suggests that employee participation and democracy require employees to be included in decision-making processes impacting various aspects of their work lives and establishing self-management programmes.

Linking employee participation and labour unrest

Nel *et al.* (2016) have identified employment conditions such as lack of employee participation as a trigger to labour unrest. Employees sometimes have high hopes of being included in specific employment issues; when such expectations are not met, they resort to labour unrest (Sishi, 2016; Dhai *et al.*, 2011). In many organisations, top management tends to make unilateral decisions that become difficult to execute because they are not received well by low-level employees (Dede, 2019). As a result, employees will engage in negative actions such as losing interest in their jobs and strike action (Dede, 2019). Collective bargaining is a participation channel provided by the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 (Lester, 2014; Venter, 2014). According to Sishi (2016), a direct link between collective bargaining and labour unrest has been identified. It has been established that centralised collective bargaining in the South African mining sector (Lester, 2014). This form of collective bargaining has been heavily criticised for its rigid processes that result in poor representation of the interests of employees who occupy lower levels in the organisation (Bhorat & Oosthuizen, 2012; Venter & Levy, 2014). According to Madlala and Govender (2018), the collective engagement framework used in South Africa must be reviewed, especially in the mining sector.

Trade union officials represent mineworkers in collective bargaining; however, mineworkers have placed serious allegations against trade union officials, accusing them of working too close to management and engaging in caucus meetings (Lester, 2014; Makhubedu, *et al.*, 2017). They further alleged that they are willing to compromise workers' interests and demands (Makhubedu *et al.*, 2017). Deficits associated with the mine industry trade unions indicate poor employee participation in decision-making which may contribute to labour unrest. Additionally, Shop stewards representing mineworkers in decision-making do not report back directly to their constituents but to officials who occupy higher positions within the company (Lester, 2014). They prefer to execute their tasks on the surface, which results in poor communication and contact with underground workers (Lester, 2014). Makhubedu *et al.* (2017) further established that when employees are not directly included, reaching the common ground is difficult even when they are represented. Therefore, it is essential for management to engage with employees directly (Makhubedu *et al.*, 2017).

Furthermore, Madlala and Govender (2018) also revealed that the Marikana tragedy exposed a crisis in employee representation as employees demanded to

engage directly with management independently from the recognised trade unions. The LRA 66 of 1995 promotes employee participation through workplace forums. According to Pather (2008), workplace forums facilitate employee participation in decision-making in organisations to ensure that employees have an input in decisions taken by the management. Notably, there are no workplace forums in the South African mining sector (Lester, 2014). The absence of workplace forums in the South African mining sector is challenging (Lester, 2014). According to Lester (2014), establishing workplace forums would minimise issues such as labour unrest; therefore, it is submitted that workplace forums would address shortcomings of centralised collective bargaining.

Research Methodology

A qualitative research method approach was used to answer the research question necessary to achieve the objectives of this study. Qualitative research is an approach whereby individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences to understand their social reality (Mohajan, 2018). The current study adopted a hermeneutic phenomenology research strategy. Hermeneutic phenomenological social research concerns the participants' personal experiences and interpreting them (Ramsook, 2018). Hermeneutic phenomenology was used to explain mineworkers' daily experiences regarding whether they are permitted to engage in decision-making or are not permitted to participate. Both male and female mineworkers who occupy low-l analysis as a method applied in a study to enable the researcher to identify, analyse, organise, describe, and report the collected data. It is also known as a process of establishing patterns and themes within the data (Evans, 2018).

Findings

In this study, the quoted responses from the participants are not edited or amended as part of the ethical considerations.

Theme 1: Employee participation

The study participants' responses show that the employees clearly understand what employee participation in decision-making entails. Participants argued that commented that management must inform the employees about the affairs of the organisation so that they are aware of what is going on in the organisation, which will enable them to participate.

P4 and P6 commented in a similar vein stating that employee participation is whereby the management includes and consults with employees before making decisions that will impact their lives.

P4: *'My understanding is that before major decisions are made that affect the workers they should be informed'.*

P6: *'My understanding of the participation of employees in the decision-making in the workplace is that management particularly top management must consider the interests and the needs of the employees before making any decisions and they must involve them in whatever decision they are making'.*

P5 endorsed participative decision-making because the participant believes it holds positive outcomes for the organisation and its employees. The participant responded by saying that:

'This is the involvement when you have some things to decide on and employees also have their own views. I do believe that through their participants the company can make things easier'.

In this regard P2 noted that in the South African mining sector trade unions are responsible for representing employees in the decision-making processes therefore, they should constantly engage with constituents to find out what their inputs and opinions are pertaining for them to be presented to the management and integrated when decisions are made. P2 had this to say:

'I think first you got to start with the unions whereby the unions will go back to the employees and find out what are their problems and then they are also in a good platform to present those to the management'.

Summing up, it is evident from the participants' responses that they have a firm understanding of what the concept of employee participation in decision-making involves. It is important to know what employee participation entails to actively engage in the process when presented with the opportunity. They strongly wish to be actively involved in decision-making processes that will have an impact on their lives. In the following section, the theme of financial participation is discussed.

Theme 2: Financial participation

Five of the participants (50%) displayed a desire to participate more, especially in the decision-making process that will have an impact on the financial aspects of their lives. They want to be kept up to date pertaining to financial affairs and decisions of the organisation. Elaborating on being kept up to date with financial information and decisions P8 stated that:

'My understanding is that whatever management or the company itself must inform employees in terms of whatever they wanted to reach in terms of profit'.

They want to be involved in contractual agreements. Furthermore, lack of financial participation creates dissatisfaction in an organisation which contributes to labour unrest. Participants argued that participants invest in the organisation through their efforts and labour to ensure that there are high levels of production. However, when it comes to financial participation they do not benefit from the success of the organisation.

P10 narrated their frustration and experience by saying that:

'Looking at the profits that the mines are making and looking at the salaries that they are paying people. We know the value of minerals like gold and platinum and we know what is being produced per day, we know what is being produced in a month and we know the price of gold or the price of platinum or whatever mineral'.

From the collected data, it seems like when there are high levels of production and profits in an organisation, the study participants expect to benefit since they are part of the organisation and profit-sharing forms part of financial participation. Financial participation contributes significantly to the labour unrest. The employees have a mandate and responsibility to render their services to the employer because they are bonded by a contractual agreement. The employer must consider allowing employees to participate in financial participation and benefit from the profits and success of the organisation because it is evident that excluding employees from participating in decisions that will have a financial impact in their lives generates negative emotions that contribute to labour unrest. The theme of direct participation is the next generated theme.

Theme 3: Direct participation

Participants expressed their desire to have direct engagement with the employer because the current participation which are trade unions is deemed ineffective. The participants argued that they are in a better position to represent their interests and needs in decision-making processes therefore they should engage directly with the employer. Participants clearly stated that an element of direct employee participation in decision-making must be present.

P3 responded by saying that: *'There needs to be individual participation where you can also have input'.*

From the responses of the participants, participants argue that trade unions should be dissolved because they are failing to fulfil their duties and responsibilities, hence participants opt for direct participant. P7 and P10 had this to say:

P7: *'I think trade unions should just move so they don't have an impact on the employees they just want to benefit on their own'.*

Participants demand direct involvement with the employer, but in this study, direct participation is not endorsed or ideal because the organization cannot cater to all the individual needs and interests of employees. However, the current employee participation structure, trade unions in the South African mining sector, should be drastically improved. The theme of desire to participate but constrained is the next constructed theme.

Theme 4: Desire to participate but constrained

Even though efforts and attempts are made by employees to be included in decision-making, it seems like employees have the desire to participate in decision-making but are constrained by certain factors that constrain them. A factor that seemed to be a barrier is the lack of formal education, which is discussed in detail in chapter 2. This barrier discourages and contributes to the fact that some employees display a passive attitude when participating in decision-making. The field notes gathered during the semi-structured interviews also contributed to the development of the theme above. There were informal engagements with other mine employees in African languages; unfortunately, their responses could not be recorded as the study was conducted in English. Therefore, they choose to distance themselves from the employee participating in the decision-making process and have developed the mentality that decision-making rests with management. This is derived from the response below:

P1: *'It is always up to management to decide what is going to happen and when it is going to happen due to their expertise, they have a better understanding of the workplace'.*

Lack of formal education is a barrier therefore some employees choose not to be involved in the employee participation process and opt that all issues pertaining to employee participation in decision-making must be handled by trade unions. The above is derived from the following responses:

P1: *'Unions decide what is good for the employees'*

Employees who occupy low job positions like the idea of being consulted prior to decision-making but they are hindered by lack of formal education. Therefore, they

choose not to be involved in the employee participation process. They suggest that trade unions should decide on their behalf what is good for them without consulting them. In the view of the study, employees may find themselves in an unfavorable position because trade union officials may put their interests before those of the employees. The current state of employee participation is the next theme that was developed.

Theme 5: Trade union limitations

A total of nine participants (90%) indicated that there are gaps in the current participation structure which are trade unions. Participants argue that trade unions are not fulfilling their purpose of furthering the interests of employees to the extent that they tend to make decisions without consulting their constituents.

P1: commented and said that:

'Unions do make decisions without even consulting the members. We often find emails or correspondence where decisions have just been made and we just must go in with that without participating in the outcome of those decisions.'

P5 noted that trade unions are limited in their knowledge capacity of representing employees. The participant responded by saying that:

'I am not that very satisfied with the trade unions because of they got their limitations. They are limited, they cannot go beyond, they are just limited.'

P10 noted that that trade unions have close relations with management which negatively impact the representation of the interest of employees.

'The trade unions they are supposed to be standing for the people, with the people but that is not happening because those people they sit with the management.'

Furthermore, it has been established that trade union officials have lost contact with underground employees, which means that their input and interests are overlooked. This is evident in the following response:

P3: *'They must go back to the plants, they must go to work again, and they must go listen to what the people on the floor are doing.'*

It has been determined that trade unions are not reliable because they lack transparency and consistency in terms of delivering what they have promised to the employees. P5 shared the following:

'Yes, they are not transparent let us just say that and they are not to be trusted because they change like chameleons.'

The study participants recommended ways in which these shortfalls can be addressed. The need for trade union officials to undergo training has been

established to gain more knowledge and be better equipped to represent the interests of employees and be up to date with current affairs concerning the organization. Training will also assist in reminding both old and new trade union officials of their purpose that of sufficiently representing employees. Trade union officials need to be rotated with new members so that new ideas can come to the fourth. Furthermore, it was recommended that trade unions be rotated because when they occupy the same position for a long time, they become reluctant to execute their responsibilities. Additionally, they get influenced by the management because they have built too close a relationship with them. Study participants also noted the disadvantages of having more than one trade union. They shared that trade unions compete with one another, and internal conflicts exist. Therefore, they recommended that trade unions must be unified to represent employees sufficiently. The study participants believe that by implementing the above recommendations, trade unions will be improved, and they will be effective. The theme of the current state of employee participation is next and discussed.

Theme 6: Current state of employee participation

The study participants raised the issue of unilateral decision-making by management. They argued that management tends to make decisions that affect their work lives without consulting them. They further noted that management does seek their opinions prior to making decisions but they do not integrate them in final decisions. The participants argue that management has put in place documents that encourage 'employee' participation however it fails to execute what is written down on paper. The participants responded by saying that:

P7: *'Most of the time employees don't have decision-making, decisions are made for them by managers and then managers just come and tell you this is what's happening and then you have to follow by the rules and abide'.*

P3: *'Well documentation is there where they say it yes but when you do you will get a negative answer'.*

There was consensus among the participants that employees who occupy lower levels within the organization, especially underground workers, are completely excluded from participating in decision-making processes. P1 and P10 commented in a similar vein:

P1: *'With my experience in this company I have been with this company for 30 years and the lower-level employees do raise some concerns and problems and so forth but the actual participation in decision-making is very low'.*

P10: *'The people on the ground which are the actual people that get their hands on. So, according to me they are the most important people in the company but when it comes to decision-making, they don't have much to say. Like for instance if we talk of production, there are people on the management who do their focus that today this is what we want to do and the people on the ground are not involved. So, when it comes to decision-making, the most important people which are people on the ground don't have much to say'.*

From the participants' responses, there is poor employee participation in decision-making in Sibanye Stillwater. The participants argue that there are documents put in place by management to encourage employee participation in decision-making, but what is written in the documents is not practiced. The lower-level employees feel entirely excluded from participation in decision-making.

Discussions

The study's primary aim was to explore whether poor employee participation in decision-making contributes to labor unrest in the South African mining sector. More specifically, this research aimed to investigate the perceptions and experiences of employees who occupy low levels positions within the organization to establish whether there is meaningful employee participation in decision-making. Mitonga-Monga et al. (2012) state that for employee participation to be deemed meaningful, employees who occupy low-levels within the organization must be included in all decision-making processes. Findings provided significant insight into how lack of meaningful employee participation in decision-making influences labor unrest in the South African mining sector. Six significant themes revealed the perceptions and experiences of the study participants regarding their participation in decision-making process that have an impact on their work lives. The study's findings indicated that barriers need to be addressed for employee participation to be perceived as meaningful. What is evident in this research is that participants as individuals who occupy low levels within the organization feel excluded from participation in decision-making. The participants confirmed that there are existing documents that are formulated by management in support of employee participation however what is written in these documents is not put into practice in terms of ensuring that there is meaningful employee participation. The results are aligned with previous studies that highlighted that employee participation channels created by the LRA are not efficiently integrated in terms of

confirming employee participation in decision-making in the mining sector (Lester, 2014).

The South African mining sector acknowledges and utilizes trade unions as an employee participation structure (Lester, 2014). Due to trade unions' limitations, participants demand that direct employee participation be integrated as a participation structure. This is also supported by the study of Madlala and Govender (2018) where it is revealed that the Marikana tragedy exposed that there is a crisis in employee representation as employees demanded to engage directly with management independently from the recognized trade unions. Makhubedu *et al.* (2017) recommend that employees be presented with the opportunity to engage directly with the management. It must be considered that the mining industry employs many people; therefore, direct employee participation is not practical because individual engagements with management would be time-consuming. Furthermore, the study findings indicate that certain factors such as minimum levels of education among employees may hinder this form of participation. (Smit and Mji, 2012; Chilwane, 2019) confirm that their high illiteracy levels among mine workers are a barrier to effective participation in decision-making. Some of the study participants stated that trade unions are a significant participant structure. Therefore, it is essential to have effective trade unions to represent these employees effectively. An issue of major concern that was raised is that trade union officials have lost contact with underground employees. This raises the question of how they can efficiently represent these employees' interests in decision-making processes if there are no contact and interactions. The study of Lester (2014) confirms that trade unions have lost contact with employees, underground employees, specifically, as they prefer to occupy offices at the surface level.

From the study findings, when there is an increase in production levels, the study participants expect to participate in the generated profits. Their concerns align with Lord (1995), who proposed that employees should participate in generated profits as it facilitates accurate and cooperative relations between the employers and employees. However, it cannot be overlooked that it is a challenge for the employer to allow this form of participation as it has a responsibility to protect and ensure that shareholders of the organization receive acceptable and maximum returns (Madlala & Govender 2018). Dougall (2014) identified Employee Share ownership (ESOP) as a form of financial participation that most organizations adopt. Anglo-American has successfully implemented the ESOP in

the mining industry (Bezuidenhout, Bischoff & Mashayamombe, 2020). Even though there are claims that the organization has successfully implemented the program, approximately 300 workers at Kumba's Sishen mine, an Anglo-American operation, embarked on a strike shortly after receiving large pay-outs (Bezuidenhout *et al.*, 2020). The fact that employees embarked on a strike after benefiting greatly from (ESOP) remains questionable (Bezuidenhout *et al.*, 2020). It is explained that there was a unilateral setting up of the ESOP by management where employees were excluded. Lord (1995) also explains that such financial participation schemes are questionable because they do not provide employee participation. Gishen, (1990) and Dough (2014) argue that in South Africa, most companies have excluded employees when designing and implementing profit-sharing schemes, which is the main reason for its failure. Dough (2014) further explains that financial participation schemes enforced on people without seeking their input have minimum chances of success. It is advisable that employers develop a fair pre-agreed formula to allow mutual benefit and division of financial gains where employees participate in its formulation (Lord, 1995).

To summarize, the findings indicate that the degree of employee participation in decision-making is poor, and employees are unhappy about their current level of participation. From the data gathered, employees wish to be more involved by increasing their level of participation. From the study's findings in the South African mining sector, the management and trade unions are significant players in employee participation; therefore, their shortfalls influence labor unrest. Participants have expressed dissatisfaction with the current participation structure, and they argue that the management makes unilateral decisions that are enforced on employees. Mining organizations' future and sustainability depend on these significant role players to develop and implement practical approaches to address the issue of poor employee participation in decision-making that will reduce labor unrest.

Limitations of the study

Strikes present a challenge nationwide. Nevertheless, this study will be limited to the South African mining sector. The scope of the research study will also be limited to employees on only one Gauteng goldmine due to financial constraints. Unfortunately, travelling to mining industries in other provinces would be too costly. The fact that this study cannot be generalized to all mining industries is a limitation. Another limitation is that participants may not be credible due to fear of being exposed because they are current employees. It is possible that they may

omit or withhold information that is relevant to this study. A small convenience sampling was employed; therefore, the results cannot be generalized to other mining organizations in different provinces in South Africa, conducting the study in other organizations and provinces would enhance the validity and reliability of the study. Some employees were willing to participate in the study but were hindered as the study was carried out in English. Their responses were not recorded but were handwritten by the researcher as they responded in African languages, which may have affected the data quality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research highlighted the impact of poor employee participation in decision-making on labor unrest in the South African mining industry. The research findings should encourage the mine management to re-evaluate the current state of employee participation in decision-making and take corrective measures that will significantly reduce labor unrest.

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