

THE STATE OF PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY IN SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT AFTER 30 YEARS OF DEMOCRACY: CHALLENGES AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

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Abstract:

South African government is mandated by the Constitution to provide services to the citizens. However, the South African government has been criticised for poor public service delivery in the national, provincial, and local governments. The country held its first democratic elections in 1994 and this ignited hope for many South African citizens who were oppressed and excluded by the apartheid regime. It is so unfortunate that after 30 years of democracy, the government is still struggling to provide effective and efficient service delivery to all South African citizens. The South African local government is seen as the closest and most convenient sphere for service delivery and strengthening democracy, however, this sphere has witnessed many protests related to service delivery throughout the country. In these protests, the citizens demonstrate their discontent with the status of service provision by South African municipalities. The South African public sector's ability to provide sustainable public service delivery has been hampered by corruption, maladministration, nepotism, lack of consequence management and ethical leadership, political will and accountability. This paper seeks to analyse the current state of public service delivery in South Africa after 30 years of democracy. It provides strategies that the government can adopt to improve service delivery and ensure that the citizens reap the benefits of democracy. The qualitative approach was adopted through the review of current existing literature to meet the objectives of this paper. Theoretically, it is found that fraud and corruption in local government continue to pose a significant challenge to good governance in the public sector, with large quantities of state monies going unaccounted for and state resources being used for personal advantage. The paper recommends that South African municipalities should embrace digital governance to accelerate service delivery.

Key words: citizens, democracy, digital governance, municipalities, and service delivery.

JEL classification: H83

Received 22 March 2024; Accepted 14 November 2024

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In terms of Section 152 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, municipalities have a constitutional obligation to provide democratic and accountable government, sustainable service provision, social and economic development, and a safe and healthy environment (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). Local government is considered the 'delivery arm' of government, as it prioritises understanding citizens' needs. Municipalities are responsible for ensuring that underdeveloped communities receive better services. This will provide equitable access to services for all citizens (Mawela, Ochara & Twinomurinzi, 2017). In the 21st century, service delivery remains a significant concern. Protests of poor service delivery are prevalent worldwide, especially in countries where public services are inadequate (Mamokhere, 2020). South African municipalities face ongoing service delivery challenges. Many municipalities are unable to spend funds allocated to them, resulting in incomplete projects that were planned for (Mudzusi, Munzhedzi & Mahole, 2024). South African municipalities have been heavily criticised for inadequate administration, which results in poor service delivery to the population. Fraud and corruption in local government and public service, in general, continue to pose a significant challenge to good governance in the public sector, with large quantities of state monies going unaccounted for and state resources being used for personal advantage (Mamokhere, 2020). Local

municipalities' supply of vital services has been a long-standing issue, affecting many municipal personnel. Municipal personnel have faced criticism for poor performance and conduct, including allegations of corruption and inadequate qualifications (Mpofu & Hlatywayo, 2015). South African municipal government has numerous issues. The most impediment to public service delivery is a lack of ethical leadership (Mbandlwa, Dorasamy & Fagbadebo, 2020). Local government faces challenges such as institutional capacity, financial mismanagement, corruption, and low public participation. These are significant challenges that limit local government operations and result in service delivery protests and demonstrations (Xolani, Mkhize & Mlambo, 2022). In South Africa, local municipal authorities struggle to provide adequate service delivery. The massive protests that have characterised South African communities have brought to light issues with service delivery (Mpofu & Hlatywayo, 2015). The research question arose from the fact that South Africa has been a democratic country for nearly 30 years, but municipalities are failing to provide efficient services to citizens, and the situation is deteriorating by the day. The primary goal of this paper is to analyse the state of local government, particularly the challenges faced in the democratic era and to recommend strategies that the government can use to mitigate these challenges and promote sustainable public service delivery.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To fulfil the research objectives, this paper employed the qualitative research approach, which included a survey of current literature. The literature was carefully selected to address issues connected to public service delivery in a democratic period. The literature was collected from different data sets such as ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, EBSCO hosts, and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJs). This study is timely, given that South African municipalities are now failing to offer effective and efficient services to their inhabitants. South African municipalities are considered as a vehicle for democracy, and while most citizens rely on municipal services, poor municipal service delivery undermines municipalities' mission under the South African Constitution, and citizens bear the brunt of the consequences.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

South African municipalities are considered a vehicle for democracy. This implies that most of the South African citizens rely on municipal services for survival, however, poor municipal service delivery undermines municipalities' mandates enshrined in the South African Constitution, 1996. Mamokhere and Meyer (2023) indicate that inadequate service delivery has resulted in widespread protests in South African municipalities across all provinces. On the other hand, Chauke (2021) implies that a lack of good governance affects municipalities' performance and service provision. Poor governance in South African municipalities is evident through a lack of engagement or inclusiveness in municipal budgeting and planning and, a lack of transparency and accountability. Therefore, this article adopted digital governance theory as a theoretical framework. The digital governance theory is strongly advocated by van der Waldt (2023) and Zindi (2024) as a solution to accelerate service delivery in the public sector. Mamokhere and Meyer (2023) agree that policymakers should explore developing tools such as e-participation for public engagement in decision-making processes. By including the public in digitalised decision-making, policymakers may guarantee that the people's interests and concerns are addressed, and that public officials and bureaucrats are held responsible for their actions. As a result, this theory is also relevant to research based on its core and argumentation to improve and maintain sustainable service delivery, as stipulated in the Republic of South Africa's Constitution of 1996. Van der Waldt (2023) indicates that the digital governance theory intends to address the following core areas; enhance service

delivery, increase efficiency, promote stakeholder engagement, strengthen transparency and data-driven decision-making.

Similarly, Zindi (2024) indicates that the theory strengthens accountability and openness in the administration of the local government by ensuring that the decision-making process is visible and inclusive. Faloyi and Ajoyi (2021) state that "digital governance allows municipalities to provide easy public access to budget, planning, and project updates through online portals and dashboards. This kind of openness leads to good service delivery and allows public participation". Moreover, Zindi (2024) and Van der Walddt (2023) concur that this theory also facilitates data-driven decision-making by collecting, analysing, and utilising data to make informed decisions and policymaking. Zindi (2024) indicates that municipalities can effectively identify trends and efficiently allocate resources using data analytics tools and predictive modelling approaches.

In conclusion, the article adopted digital governance theory because governments all around the world are using information communication technologies to improve service delivery, transparency, and public participation. Therefore, public officials and leaders ought to prepare for digitalisation to improve governance, efficiency, stakeholder engagement, and services. Investing in skills and knowledge is crucial for navigating digital governance and ensuring inclusivity and accessibility for all citizens.

3.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualisation of South African Public Service Delivery in a democratic Era.

Since 1994, South Africa has made noteworthy progress in establishing and strengthening its democracy. Protests have increased in response to ongoing governance and socio-economic issues, both through traditional and unconventional avenues (Graham, 2020). Local government should be democratic to foster interaction between the government and the public (Madumo, 2015). In South Africa's post-apartheid constitutional democracy, there is growing concern about the government's ability to provide public services to its citizens, which they have been demanding since 2004. Poor service delivery has sparked protests around the country, putting local government in the spotlight (Managa, 2012). South Africa's local government is facing a difficult period in the democratic era (Visser, 2009). Conflicts between political and management components in South Africa's local government have impacted municipal service delivery negatively. The public sector in Africa, including South Africa, has traditionally been seen as political (Reddy, 2016). Democracy in South Africa restored hope for millions of marginalised people. The new administration overhauled the public sector by creating and enacting legislation to ensure justice and equality in service delivery. Despite progress, the government's inability to meet community requests has led to service delivery demonstrations (Xolani, Mlambo and Mkhize, 2022). South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy has resulted in politicised municipal service delivery, highlighting inconsistencies. Municipal service delivery includes development, addressing historical injustices, alleviating poverty, and promoting economic growth (Mudzusi, Munzhedzi & Mahole, 2024). The protests indicate dissatisfaction with the results of democracy. Although some people have made progress, the majority continue to live in poverty. Unemployment is higher than it was in 1994, and income disparity remains huge. People can vote, but too frequently elected officials are self-serving, and real progress is rare (Alexander, 2010). Annually, police in South Africa record several service delivery demonstrations, often over the democratic government's inadequate service delivery (Everatt, 2008). Citizens have lost trust in local governments due to poor performance, incompetence, and corruption. Councillors and government officials' failure to fulfil pledges, abuse of authority, and lack of accountability to the public exacerbate the situation (Managa, 2012).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Service delivery Protests in the Democratic Era as the indicator of South African Municipalities' Failures

In a democratic society like South Africa, public trust in government at all levels is crucial for its functioning (Msenge & Nzewi, 2021). Violent service delivery protests have eroded public faith in local government over time. Service delivery demonstrations occur when individuals express discontent with the way public services are delivered in their area (Msenge & Nzewi, 2021). After apartheid, the ANC-led democratic government faced protests due to a perceived lack of basic services and corruption in local government (Ngcamu, 2016). Service delivery protests, particularly those involving violence, pose a threat to South Africa's democracy and sustainability (Mamokhere, 2020). Protests over service delivery in South Africa's municipalities have reached unprecedented levels after decades of democracy. Most people were filled with excitement and anticipation as the dawn of a democratic South Africa arrived. The new dispensation improved people's lives by reducing poverty, providing better housing, health and education facilities, access to water, affordable electricity, and proper sanitation. The euphoria of the new dispensation faded as governments struggled to provide basic services to all residents, especially those formerly disadvantaged by apartheid (Mashamaite, 2014). The initial enthusiasm for democracy and local government faded as citizens became dissatisfied with the government's failure to provide basic services, leading to protests, boycotts, and petitions (Mokgopo, 2016). These community protests, more than two decades after apartheid, reflect dissatisfaction with the rewards of democracy, not just service delivery (Wasserman, Chuma & Bosch, 2018). **Figure 1** below reflects the service delivery protests trend in South Africa from 2004-2022.

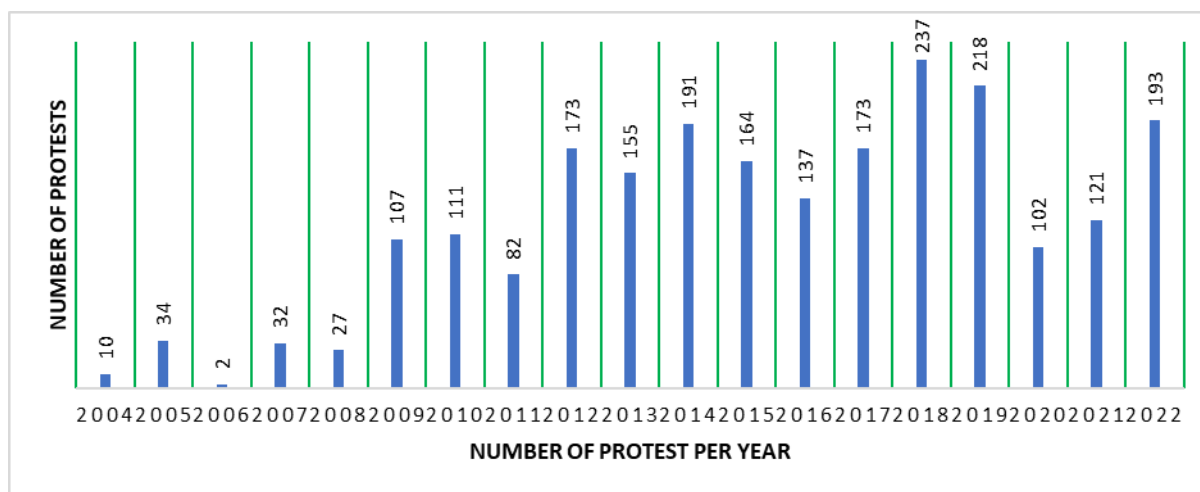


Figure 1: Major service delivery protests, by year (2004 –2022*)

Source: *Municipal IQ Municipal Hotspots Monitor* (2023)

It is evident that protests over service delivery trending as a vehicle for democracy and voicing their concerns. In 2022, a total of 193 protests were recorded. "It is clear now that the number of protests for 2022 is rising, but not significantly higher than 2020 and 2021. The 2022 record partially matched the record protest levels of 2018 and 2019 as per Figure 1. This is the highest number since post-COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa.

Public Service Delivery Challenges in a Democratic South Africa

- **Rampant Corruption in the local government sphere**

Corruption is a worldwide issue that affects all countries, with a higher prevalence in developing nations. Evidence suggests corruption in South Africa's public sector, including state control, political influence in large contracts, and political deployments (Ndlovu & Mutambara 2023). The rampant corruption in South Africa's public sector hampered the delivery of crucial services to

those in need, notably the poor and vulnerable citizens who should have been the major beneficiaries. Most local municipalities have gone bankrupt because of corruption and poor administration (Sefara & Odeku, 2023). Corruption is a growing issue in South Africa, with reports of suspected corruption involving government officials at all levels (Maile & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023). Corruption diverts finances and resources that should benefit the local population, resulting in wealth for some and chaos for those in need of basic services. Corruption is a stumbling block to South Africa's socio-economic growth, especially for blacks who face marginalisation in service delivery from local government (Mlambo, Mphurpi & Makgoba, 2023).

- ***Inadequate skills and capacity***

In 2021/22, 220 municipalities utilised financial reporting consultants. Over 53% of municipalities relied on consultants to supplement the capabilities of their finance departments. In all, 40% recruited consultants for specific skills and to fill gaps, whereas 7% employed consultants only to compensate for vacancies (AGSA, 2023). Employee turnover has caused a skills gap, leading to poor service delivery in high-risk municipalities (Shava, 2024). In 2021-22, 15 disclaimed municipalities spent R128,76 million on consultants to fill vacancies or address technical skills shortages in their financial departments. Ten municipalities saw little advantage from engaging consultants due to poor project management and inadequate record-keeping (AGSA, 2023). According to a skills audit conducted by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) in 2023, 300 local government councillors in KwaZulu Natal lack literacy skills. The AG Report (2021/22) highlights a lack of control in local government, which hinders compliance with legal frameworks for good financial management of municipalities (Shava, 2024).

- ***Governance failures***

Local governance encompasses the administration, decision-making, and management of public affairs in cities, towns, and municipalities. It entails organising several activities, services, and resources to meet the needs and interests of the local community (Edoun & Rameetse, 2023). Municipalities lacked institutionalised financial and performance management systems, hindering their ability to operate efficiently during times of transition and volatility. Ineffective municipal public accounts committees and unstable councils hampered governance effectiveness (AGSA, 2023). Municipalities around the country face issues such as insufficient administrative capacity, skills shortages, and inadequate service delivery. These problems have provided an opportunity to strengthen governance and service delivery (Edoun & Rameetse, 2023). According to the National Treasury, 43 municipalities are facing financial and service delivery crises due to political infighting, weak council oversight, severe financial problems, and general service delivery failures. Meanwhile, the number of municipalities reported as dysfunctional by the Department of Cooperative Governance has risen from 64 to 66 (AGSA, 2023). Governance failure is often caused by ineffective leadership and a lack of accountability (Thusi & Selepe, 2023).

- ***Lack of accountability and Consequence Management***

Inadequate accountability and consequence management have undermined good governance in local government, jeopardising the delivery of fundamental services. South African voters have forcibly chased away high-ranking governmental officials from their communities, citing failure to fulfil electoral promises (Thusi and Selepe, 2023). Municipal officials and leaders were not held accountable for poor performance or malfeasance. Councils' failure to address unauthorised, irregular, and inefficient expenditure, as well as inadequate action by municipal managers and senior management in response to claims of fraud, highlight this issue (AGSA, 2023). South African municipalities face obstacles in delivering effective and efficient services, including poor governance, corruption, silos, and a lack of expertise (Mamokhere & Kgobe, 2023). Inadequate consequence management in local municipalities may lead to ineffective regulation and corruption (Enwereji, 2022).

- ***Poor financial planning and management***

Municipalities must properly manage their budgets to sustain operations and services. According to the National Treasury, 112 municipalities (44%) have an unfunded budget, which means that

revenue projections are overstated and will not be collected, despite the approved budget indicating sufficient funding. These municipalities are unable to pay their creditors as they spend more than they generate (AGSA, 2023). South African municipalities are under financial pressure due to weak control and accountability, which can lead to corruption and mismanagement, negatively impacting service delivery (Laubscher, 2012). Inadequate administrative and financial management, as well as ineffective controls and accountability systems, negatively impact community service delivery, resulting in issues such as water shortages and insufficient finances for basic infrastructure maintenance (Selepe & Magagula, 2023). Unfunded budgets are a leading cause of financial trouble in municipalities, according to the National Treasury. Municipalities with similar budgets are currently facing financial challenges (AGSA, 2023).

- ***Inadequate financial controls and unreliable reporting***

Internal controls enable governments to achieve their goals by reducing the risks of human error, wrong judgments, fraud, abuse, and loss. These controls avoid financial losses, waste, and violations, while also improving financial management and reporting (AGSA, 2023). Strong local government financial controls are crucial for productivity and long-term growth. Local government financial advantages transcend beyond economics and impact people's everyday lives in many localities. Financial management syndrome has been associated with inadequate institutions in democratic South African local government (Mazibuko, 2020). The South African public sector is known for its inadequate implementation and lack of monitoring of internal controls. Inadequate risk management and fraud prevention contribute to poor governance (Ngcobo & Malefane, 2017). Municipalities have resources and assistance for solid financial management and reporting, but their processes and controls are inadequate to prevent major misstatements in financial statements (AGSA, 2023). Efforts to improve financial management at the municipal level aim for excellence and best practices in public administration. There is an urgent need to implement strong financial controls at the local government level (Selepe, 2022).

- ***Ineffective use of consultants for financial reporting***

The reality is that consultants are business-oriented and profit-driven, which presents a difficulty for public-sector managers who are not on the same level (Theletsane, 2015). In 2020-2021 the consultants were paid R1.36 billion to help improve municipalities' financial reporting, even though municipal finance divisions were paid more than R10 billion in salary (Cronje, 2022). According to AGSA (2023), municipalities spent R1.61 billion on financial reporting consultants in 2021-22, up nearly a fifth from R1.36 billion the previous year. Consultants were most utilised for asset management (34%), taxation (29%), and financial statement preparation or review (26%). Despite municipalities' significant consultant expenses, the intended audit outcomes have yet to be delivered. 59% of the financial statements generated by consultants and submitted for audits included serious misstatements (SAICA, 2021). Despite spending on consultants to produce high-quality financial statements, the desired results were not obtained. Approximately 62% of the 137 towns that engaged consultants had serious misstatements in their financial accounts (AGSA, 2022).

- ***Irregular, fruitless, and wasteful expenditure***

Fruitless and wasteful expenditures are those that fail to achieve the desired goal and could have been avoided with reasonable care. Examples include purchasing goods or services that are unnecessary or ineffective for the municipality (Fernandez & Madumo, 2024). South African municipal government is in turmoil, and things are getting worse. Municipalities often struggle with poor service delivery, limited infrastructure, and bad financial management (Thusi & Selepe, 2023). Spending that is wasteful and fruitless has kept rising. It increased from R2.15 billion to R4.74 billion, more than doubling in 2021-2022.

Since the year 2019 (AGSA, 2023). In contrast, financially distressed municipalities' widespread mismanagement of public funds, corruption, and wasteful expenditures show that South African municipal leadership is seen as a stepping stone to personal enrichment, which runs counter to the principles of good governance (Makole, 2022).

- **Material irregularities (MI)**

Any violation of the law, fraud, theft, or breach of fiduciary duty that was discovered during an audit and caused or is likely to cause a material financial loss, the misappropriation or loss of a significant public resource, or significant harm to a public sector organisation or the public is considered a material irregularity (Ensor,2024). The audit, which included 176 municipalities, revealed a systemic failure in local government by numerous stakeholders to hold public employees accountable for gross financial mismanagement (Democratic Alliance,2024). The AGSA has identified fraud and corruption as the primary cause of material irregularities. Lack of repercussions management is also a contributing factor to the municipal financial crisis (McKenzie & Marx, 2024). The 194 MIs incurred a total financial loss of R5,19 billion, with municipalities losing R1.6 billion due to their investment in VBS Mutual Bank (AGSA, 2023). A sample of national and provincial departments incurred a loss of R14.34 billion between the 2018/19 and 2022/23 fiscal years because of substantial irregularities discovered by the Auditor General (Ensor, 2024).

Table 1 summarises key challenges in public service delivery and mitigation strategies that the government can use to promote sustainable public service delivery. The local government sphere in South Africa is closer to the communities, making it critical for this sphere to fulfil its constitutional obligation of public service delivery. It is critical to note that most South African citizens rely on municipal services due to a lack of employment opportunities, high poverty levels, and high inequality among South Africans.

Table 1: Key Challenges and Strategies

Challenges in Public Service Delivery	Mitigate Strategies
Rampant Corruption in the local government sphere	The Accounting officers at South African Municipalities must introduce robust internal control systems to eradicate corruption that has almost collapsed the local government sphere. Salawu <i>et.al</i> 2024 indicated that internal controls play a vital role in reducing corruption.
Inadequate skills and capacity	The municipalities across South Africa must adopt the Professionalisation framework that has been introduced by the government to professionalise the local government sphere. The local government must also promote the recruitment and appointment of candidates with the necessary skills and expertise.
Governance failures	The leadership in the local government sphere must promote good governance, monitor the performance of the municipalities, policy and decision-making reviews. People appointed to leadership positions must have the necessary skills and expertise.
Lack of accountability and Consequence Management	The accounting officer must ensure that all municipal officials who have transgressed the policies are held accountable and consequence management must be executed.
Poor financial planning	The local government in South Africa is having a huge challenge when it comes to handling public finances and this is evident in using consultants to perfect financial reporting in the

Challenges in Public Service Delivery	Mitigate Strategies
	local government sphere due lack of skilled employees. The municipalities must appoint financial officials who have the necessary skills and expertise to prioritise financial administration in the local government sphere.
Inadequate financial controls and unreliable reporting	Municipalities must establish robust financial controls to prioritise financial administration in the local government sphere.
Ineffective use of consultants for financial reporting	The municipalities must ensure that there is a transfer of skills and expertise from consultants to municipal officials.
Irregular, fruitless, and wasteful expenditure	The major reason for Irregular, fruitless, and wasteful expenditure in the local government sphere is non-compliance and lack of expertise and skilled officials. The local government must ensure that skilled officials are appointed, and internal control systems are improved to eradicate poor financial administration in the local government sphere.
Material irregularities (MI)	Councils, municipal public accounts committees and provincial leadership and legislatures to monitor and support the resolution of material irregularities by accounting officers
Political Interference	De-politicisation of service delivery in local government is recommended to ensure that there is no clash between political and administrative officials.

Source: Authors Own

The table above presents mitigation strategies that South Africa's local government can use to address local government challenges and promote sustainable public service delivery. It is important to note that local government is closer to the public and serves as a vehicle for democracy, making it critical in terms of South African public service delivery. Most citizens in the country are poor and living below the poverty line due to a lack of economic opportunities and a high rate of inequality, and as a result, more citizens rely on government services. The authors argue that the government should work tirelessly to restore stability in this area for the constitutional mandate to be recognised.

CONCLUSION

After 30 years of democracy, South African municipalities have faced numerous challenges, resulting in the problem of democratic gains. South African citizens have taken to the streets to express their dissatisfaction with poor service delivery in local municipalities throughout the country. South African municipalities must implement internal control systems to improve financial administration in the sector. The most common challenges in the sphere are caused by political interference, skill deficiencies, corruption, a lack of political will, and a lack of compliance and accountability. As a result, the local government ensures that political and administrative duties are separated, that skilled officials are appointed, and that internal control systems are in place to eliminate corruption and promote accountability and compliance within the sphere. This will help to ensure the sphere's sustainability and the municipalities' constitutional mandate.

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