

The Review Of Strategies That Can Be Used To Improve Service Delivery In Municipalities With Specific Reference To Vhembe District Municipalities In Limpopo Province, South Africa.

L mbedzi^{1*}, S T matloga²

^{1*}(university of Venda) email: Langanani.mbedzi@univen.ac.za

²Email: Sanah.matloga@univen.ac.za (university of Venda)

abstract

One of the obstacles facing municipalities is ensuring the provision of essential services to all South Africans. This manuscript aims to assess the approaches that could enhance service delivery in municipalities, focusing on the Vhembe District Municipality in Limpopo Province. The South African government is constitutionally mandated to offer basic services to all citizens. Previous studies have highlighted the necessity for enhancing service delivery, a challenge exacerbated by financial limitations, insufficient human resources, and technical constraints. Despite the strides made by post-apartheid South Africa, numerous municipalities continue to grapple with service delivery issues, particularly in rural areas, despite government initiatives like National Development Plan and District Development Model. This research adopts a qualitative approach using desktop method to get information from secondary data, such as municipalities' Integrated Development Plan (IDP), audit reports and annual reports. The study employs good governance theory to review strategies for enhancing service delivery in Vhembe District Municipality. While many scholars have examined service delivery status in municipalities, few have delved into strategies for improvement. The findings underscore significant service delivery gaps in the municipality that require urgent attention. Consequently, the study recommends outsourcing service delivery expertise to ensure sustainable services for communities, aligning with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996.

Keywords: Strategies, Service Delivery, Vhembe District Municipality, and Local Government.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Service delivery in South Africa has been surrounded by challenges long before democracy, especially in rural areas and townships. Since the dawn of democracy in 1994, the South African Legislatures have focused on changing unconstitutional laws, building democratic and transparent legislatures responsive to the masses' demands, and establishing new institutions to promote democracy and human rights (Mlambo & Maserumule, 2023). Section 152 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, mandated all municipalities to provide service to the community sustainably. Mathebula (2016) argued that the democratic government has not fully made an impact in terms of closing the gaps opened by the apartheid government, particularly on matters of service delivery in local government, which is zoomed through service delivery protests and other challenges that South Africa has not yet fully recovered from the apartheid legacy. Mamokhere (2020) add that these protests have often turned violent and destructive, causing damage to property and loss of life.

Local government in South Africa has a mammoth task to deliver services, which requires a well-run and effectively coordinated state to achieve development (Lekala, 2019). South African municipalities, therefore, should become the development of service delivery, poverty alleviation, infrastructure, and economic development by ensuring that members of the public within the municipality develop trust and a sense of belonging to the development initiatives of their government. Magagula, Mukonza, Manyaka, and Moeti (2022) indicated that all spheres of government were created to ensure that all citizens of the Republic of South Africa receive affordable, equal services and infrastructure, as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. However, most people in South Africa are deprived of access to basic services and are sidelined from processes which can lead to better provision of basic services (Vivek, 2024).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study is important since it will benefit municipalities in the Vhembe District Municipality (VDM). by determining which strategies, they can use to improve service delivery. The study will also contribute to literature to educate municipalities on which strategies they can use to improve the delivery of services to the people.

METHODOLOGY

A desktop qualitative approach was adopted, and data were sourced from available published article journals, books, Integrated Development Plan (IDP), audit reports, annual reports and documents generated by government entities. Leavy (2014) asserts that qualitative research employs inductive approaches to knowledge building aimed at generating meaning. Researchers use this approach to review explore, investigate, and unpack strategies that can be used to improve service delivery. It is for this reason that numerous studies and records were reviewed and analysed to obtain an overview of how municipalities can do to improve service delivery.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The notion of service delivery is examined in this section of the literature review from the perspective of South African local municipalities. It also incorporates private sector approaches that could improve the effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery in South African local municipalities. The history of service delivery in South Africa, as well as the principles that guide service delivery and the Batho Pele principles, are discussed further.

THEORETICAL AND LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORKS UNDERPINNING THE STUDY

The theory is a systematic grouping of interdependent concepts and principles that give a framework to tie together a significant area of knowledge (Lamidi, 2015). Local government must have policies and institutional frameworks in place to support and sustain local people's development, and such plans must be geared toward the achievement and progressive implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and fundamental rights must be oriented toward people. In addition, local government must promote better leadership. Municipal officials must be prudently, efficiently, transparently, and accountable, promoting better leadership. Mathebula (2015) indicated that good governance involves the existence of efficient and accountable institutions and systems, as well as established rules that promote development and ensure that people can freely participate and be heard in decisions and their implementation that directly affect their lives and thereby If democracy is to be realised at the local level, citizens must be given a certain role in these processes. This will lead to more accountability and responsiveness and allow the necessary resources to be allocated to the public. This manuscript adopted structural-functional theory as a framework review of strategies that can be used to improve service delivery in municipalities with specific reference to Vhembe district municipalities.

Structural-functional Theory

Structural functionalism theory is a theoretical perspective that focuses on the functions performed in society by social structures such as institutions, hierarchies, and norms (Gómez-Diago, 2020). The theory emerged in the early 20th century and is associated with authors such as Émile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, Herbert Spencer, and Robert Merton, who dominated American social theory in the 1950s and 1960s. Van der Waldt (2017) views structural-functional as a set of theories and generalisations from the borders of the discipline of public administration to explain relationships among phenomena. Jipson (2011) indicated that structural-functional theory is a formal plan structure with the whole concept based on certain fundamental principles in which an organisation can be built up to meet a specific purpose.

Structural-functional theory provides a framework for understanding how different parts of society work together to meet the needs of individuals and society (Gómez-Diago, 2020). The theory promotes solidarity and stability by instilling a Sense of Belonging to the Community. The strengths of structural functionalism are that it can accurately model many aspects of society and shows how various organisations meet the individual's and society's needs and how these are interrelated. According to the structural-functional theory perspective sees society as an organised network of cooperating groups or an interrelated system in which each group plays a part, and each function or practice helps the system operate (Archibong & Antia, 2022).

The theory uses the organism analogy to explain that society exists in structures with interrelated and interdependent functions for the survival of society. In critics, Macionis (2012) holds that structural-functional theory tends to talk about individual actors as decision-makers. However, functionalist theorists treat individuals as puppets whose decisions are a predictable result of their location in the social structure and of the norms. At the same time, Bauman and Skitka (2009) argued that structural-functional theory has often pictured individuals as having little or no control over their own actions rather than being directed by the system in order to survive. The structural-functional theory is relevant to this study as it consists of organisations that interpret society by providing a good understanding of what needs to be carried out in the short run and long run. The theory has been deemed useful for understanding society on the grounds (public members). It demonstrates that institutions are connected to and dependent on one another to achieve the goal. In this study, the researcher used the

structure-function theory as it relates to organisations and society, including providing for the needs of society at large.

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996)

Delivering high-quality services to the designated beneficiaries is crucial within the municipality. This has led the South African parliament to create legal frameworks to support service delivery in communities. Municipalities operate under the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, and are mandated to provide appropriate community services. While municipalities are required to create bylaws, they must not contradict national legislation, which is the country's supreme law. Any law or action against it is considered invalid, and the obligations outlined in the Constitution must be upheld. The government has established structures to assist municipalities in delivering quality services to communities per the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. Section 151(1) of the Constitution allows for the establishment of municipalities at the local level to address the inequalities of the apartheid era. The VDM should promote the municipality's social and economic development to ensure that all residents and communities within the municipality have access to at least the minimum level of basic municipal services referred to in sections 152(1)(b) and 153(a) of the Republic of South Africa's Constitution of 1996.

The obligations imposed on the government, particularly at the local level, by Sections 26 and 27 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) are aimed at ensuring the gradual realisation of rights to housing, water, sanitation, and other essential services such as electricity and refuse removal. While basic service policy and legislation acknowledge the importance of prioritising access to these services for the poor, implementing this in practice has proven challenging. One of the main obstacles lies in the distribution of resources between the national government and municipalities and within municipalities themselves. To address this issue, there is a need for a more equitable redistribution of resources within municipalities. This can be achieved through various means, including advocacy efforts, active participation in public consultations on laws and policies, and improved coordination between social movements, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and community-based organisations (CBOs). Furthermore, even in cases where infrastructure is already in place, it is common for low-income tenants, particularly those residing in inner city areas, to be denied basic services or disconnected. Therefore, individuals must be aware of their rights and for research to be conducted to determine what constitutes acceptable basic services for low-income households. Ultimately, the effectiveness of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) relies on municipal officials providing services in accordance with the provisions outlined in the Act.

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 asserts that all South African citizens, including those residing in the Vhembe District Municipality communities, have the right to receive equitable service delivery. Consequently, municipal officials are responsible for providing services to the intended beneficiaries in accordance with the mandates set forth by national legislation. This responsibility extends to various entities such as committees, Community Development Workers, and Ward Councillors, as they serve as the driving force behind service delivery within the municipalities. Recognising the need to ensure optimal and efficient service provision, the South African Government established ward committees to address this challenge.

Local Government: Municipal Structures Act (117 of 1998)

The Municipal Structures Act (Act 117 of 1998) emphasises the different structures of local government and the mechanisms required for delivering high-quality services. The effectiveness of the Municipal Structures Act relies solely on the ability of municipal officials to provide services that align with the provisions of the Act. The Local Government Municipal Structures Act (117 of 1998) stipulates that leaders play a crucial role in driving service delivery, and they are entrusted with the responsibility of addressing the injustices caused by apartheid and improving the lives of all citizens sustainably. This responsibility extends to municipal officials who are expected to deliver services in accordance with the Act. In 2004, the Ward Committee system was established to promote participative democracy, as mandated by the Municipal Structures and Municipal Systems Acts. This system has become the primary platform for community engagement in local government processes.

The legislation emphasises the importance of municipal councils implementing mechanisms to engage with the community and community organisations to carry out their duties and exercise their authority. It mandates that municipal councils conduct an annual assessment of community needs, prioritise strategies to address them, and establish community involvement processes. Section 4 of the Municipal Structures Act (1998) outlines the creation of ward committees. The legislators intended for communities to be involved from the initial planning

phase to monitoring and evaluation, including the impact of these services (De Vries, 2018). The legislators intended to ensure that communities are actively engaged in every aspect of performance management.

Local Government: Municipal Systems Act (Act 32 of 2000)

The Municipal Systems Act (Act 32 of 2000) governs a municipality's internal operations and functioning. It also emphasises the importance of delivering quality services to the community. In particular, Chapter 4 of the Local Government: Municipal Systems Act, 32 of 2000, focuses on promoting community participation through community-based structures and supporting the overall functioning of the municipality. This Act is of significant importance to one of the municipalities in Vhembe District Municipality as it provides clear guidelines for effectively delivering services to the communities. Section 73 of the Local Government: Municipal Systems Act, 2000 (Act No. 32 of 2000) requires local governments to prioritise basic community services and to ensure that all members of the community have access to public minimum levels of basic municipal services, such as water, electricity, housing, and garbage disposal.

White Paper on Local Government 1998

The 1998 White Paper on Local Government outlines a comprehensive vision for a developmental local government, emphasising the need for municipalities to address the challenges of underdevelopment and poverty within their communities. Integrated development planning, performance management, and community participation are highlighted as essential tools to achieve this vision. Legislative responses have been put in place to support local government developments and enhance service delivery, with the White Paper advocating for a policy of developmental local government that prioritises participatory planning and collaboration with civil society institutions to promote community involvement and consensus-building for local development solutions. Consequently, communities would be empowered to pinpoint their requirements, establish performance benchmarks and objectives, and, consequently, hold local authorities accountable for their service delivery performance. By engaging with municipalities from an informed standpoint, communities can prompt municipalities to enhance their planning processes and operational strategies, thereby enhancing their efficiency in expediting service delivery (White Paper on Local Government, 1998). The post-apartheid era in South Africa encounters a significant hurdle in ensuring that municipalities offer optimal and proficient services to a populace of diverse cultural backgrounds.

It remains a persistent challenge to ensure that every municipality possesses the capacity to utilise available resources to address poverty and underdevelopment issues effectively. The interventions implemented should positively impact how the community tackles challenges such as public participation, program management, and the establishment of conditions conducive to sustainable service delivery and economic growth. Monitoring service delivery requirements through efficient governance and service administration is paramount. As stated by the South African Local Government Municipal Structures Act (1998), local government in South Africa has undergone a series of transformations since the transition to democracy, aiming to meet the demands of consolidating democracy and advancing the society.

The Local Government: Municipal Finance Management Act (Act 53 of 2003)

Human well-being encompasses the satisfaction of societal needs across various domains, including physical, economic, social, environmental, emotional, and spiritual aspects, as well as individuals' subjective evaluations of their lives and societal functioning. Municipalities have the authority to establish by-laws to improve service delivery in compliance with national legislation in South Africa. Upholding ethical standards among municipal officials is crucial for enhancing service delivery. Municipal employees are responsible for providing services to communities in accordance with the Municipal Finance Management Act 53 of 2003. The Municipal Infrastructure Grant (MIG) serves as the primary policy and regulatory framework for funding and managing the provision of water, sanitation, and waste removal services to communities in rural and urban municipalities in South Africa. Nevertheless, some rural municipalities misuse the MIG for purposes other than its intended objectives.

The MFMA's Section 34(3) elucidates that the national and provincial government tiers play a crucial role in enhancing the capacities of municipalities, enabling them to effectively and transparently manage their finances. In fulfilling its monitoring function, the provincial government is obligated to share the outcomes of its monitoring activities with municipalities, thereby aiding them in enhancing their financial management practices. Moreover, if the provincial government identifies any emerging or imminent financial challenges

within municipalities, it is required to promptly notify the municipality and provide assistance in mitigating these issues.

Section 35 of the MFMA outlines the requirement for the national and provincial tiers to foster a collaborative approach when engaging in fiscal and financial interactions with local government entities. This involves sharing relevant information, supporting municipalities in effective planning - including developing and revising their Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and aiding in preparing budgets in line with MFMA guidelines. On the other hand, Section 37 of the MFMA details the responsibilities of municipalities in their financial and fiscal dealings with provincial and national governments, as well as other municipalities. This includes promoting cooperation, sharing budgetary and financial data with higher levels of government, and fulfilling financial obligations to other municipalities, provinces, and the national government.

Local Government Turnaround Strategy (LGTAS), 2009

The Local Government Turnaround Strategy was implemented as a government initiative and a blueprint for improved service delivery to enhance local government's responsiveness, transparency, reliability, and effectiveness. The State of Local Government Study (2009) conducted across all nine provinces identified various challenges municipalities face, such as inadequate governance and accountability, subpar financial management, and the inability of certain administrations to provide essential municipal services. The strategy focused on five main areas: service delivery, governance, financial management, infrastructure development, and anti-corruption efforts. The overarching objective was to restore confidence in municipal leadership (State of Local Government Report, 2009).

THE IMPORTANCE OF SERVICE DELIVERY IN SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The poor service delivery frustrates communities, resulting in regular service delivery protests (Kalonda & Govender, 2021). Rana, Ali, Ria, and Irfan (2019) state that the core function of municipalities is to improve and promote a better life through service delivery. Adequate planning is essential to ensure that service delivery effectively caters to the fundamental requirements of individuals within the community. Access implies that citizens have a legitimate right to equal access to services, and public officials should not withhold that right. Communities may feel that their needs and concerns are not being considered, leading to frustration and potentially even resistance to government policies (Osborne & Plastrik, 2019). The principle of courtesy requires public officials to treat all community members with courtesy and consideration, irrespective of their social status. Access to information means that community members have the right to access accurate information regarding the public services they are legitimately entitled to. An important implication of this principle is that should the standard of service drop for any reason; citizens should be informed about why this has happened and when the situation will be remedied.

Rolland (2018) attested that South African municipalities are continuously vulnerable to potential regime changes, resulting in the introduction of new political leadership with new ideologies and strategies. Such programmes should set out, inter alia, how the departments' communication systems will improve information about the type and frequency of services that customers require and how a complaints system will be developed. Openness and transparency require municipal officials to inform citizens about, inter alia, the administration and management of public sector departments, what it costs to run them, and who is responsible for running them. Additional prescriptions about openness and transparency are contained in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. Redress implies that historically disadvantaged communities receive adequate budget allocations in terms of basic service provision. Value for money implies that community members have the right to expect efficient and economical services.

Masiya, Davids and Mangai (2019) agreed that improvement in service delivery may be achieved through enhancing community participation and effective planning. Municipalities in South Africa continue to face significant challenges in providing services. Organisations cannot promptly provide the quality of service needed to the communities due to a lack of structure, resources, and maintenance. The poor municipal infrastructure stifles service delivery progress in other areas. Poor communities' lack of resources stifles economic and social development and growth prospects. On the other hand, municipal infrastructure assists in implementing the quality plan so that high-impact economic and social infrastructure is enabled. One of the most significant issues that South Africa has is providing effective and dependable services. This is mainly due to municipal governments across South Africa lacking the necessary resources to provide essential services to their communities. Failing to respond to the service delivery protest shows an underlying lack of accountability (Mawela, 2023).

Morudu, 2017 cited those public protests, among other things, are linked to municipalities' inadequate provision of basic service delivery. Therefore, by enhancing the provision of service delivery, the municipality can effectively mitigate the occurrence of community protests. One of the objectives of local government is to provide sustainable services to the community, as enshrined in Section 152 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. Section 73 of the Local Government: Municipal Systems Act of 2000 (Act No. 32 of 2000) is about municipal services and compels all municipalities to prioritise the community's basic needs. Municipalities must also promote the development of local communities by ensuring that all community members have access to at least a minimum level of municipal basic services.

Municipalities should work closely with councillors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), and community members to identify the needs of the community and ensure that all the needs are included in the municipality's integrated development plan (IDP) and budget proposals (Masiya *et al.*, 2019). Section 153(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, indicates that a municipality must structure and manage its administration, budgeting and planning processes to prioritise the community's basic needs and promote social and economic development. Municipalities should be transparent and accountable and encourage the community to participate in service delivery issues to find solutions together (Munzhedzi, 2016). As per the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, local government should prioritise the delivery of services to the community to enhance accountability and development projects at the grass-roots level. Ndzelu (2016) classified the municipal basic services as follows;

Water and Sanitation

Water is the basic need in every household. Therefore, the government must provide water sustainably to save lives (Ndzelu, 2016). In the annual report of the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF) (2004-2005), the previous president of South Africa, President Thabo Mbeki, states that the government should ensure that every poor household receives the basic service of 6,000 litres of clean water per month for free. Municipalities should ensure that water and sanitation should be adequate, inexpensive, hygienic, and safe for all users.

Electricity

Electricity provision is one of the functions of municipalities. Municipalities must always ensure that the electrical infrastructure and systems are in place to avoid frequent power outages in commercial and residential areas (Ndzelu, 2016). This can only be achieved through regular maintenance and rehabilitation of the electrical infrastructure to prevent serious power outages and blackouts.

Roads and Storm Water Drainage

Ndzelu (2016) further argued that many road surfaces are damaged due to neglect of routine maintenance and heavy traffic in some areas, and the community should also consider stormwater drainage and road surfaces as basic infrastructure services development to prevent major repairs.

COMMUNICATION AS A KEY FACTOR IN IMPROVING SERVICE DELIVERY

Communication is very important in engaging the population and improving basic services in municipalities (Mdlalose (2016). It is important to highlight that senior municipal leaders are responsible for sharing information, providing guidance, encouraging involvement, and rallying community members through communication tactics and diverse methods tailored to specific audience demographics.

Dissemination of information

Information dissemination allows participants and stakeholders to understand the content and implications of community planning and programs (Jacobs, 1998). Municipalities must have direct communication and information sharing in the planning process to improve service delivery methods.

Consultation

Consultation should not be limited to a specific group of people but should allow community members and other stakeholders to be involved and influence the decisions made by local government (Jacobs, 1998). Section 152 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 indicates that one of the objectives of local government is to encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in local government matters.

Mobilisation

Mobilisation entails the involvement of community members in planning and evaluating basic services provided by the government with a shared responsibility (Jacobs, 1998). Municipalities have adopted the integrated development plan (IDP) as a vital tool for planning and development, ensuring that available resources are optimally used to promote sustainable economic and social development (Naidoo & Ramphal, 2018).

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT PLAN (IDP) IN SERVICE DELIVERY

The Integrated Development Plan (IDP) process is defined in Section 25 of the Local Government Municipal Systems Act, 2000 (Act No. 32 of 2000) as a single, inclusive planning process within which the municipal plan and procedures must be documented. The IDP is the key instrument municipalities use to fulfil their obligations through planning and budget allocation (Mdlalose, 2016). Therefore, the formulation of the IDP is to be transparent and inclusive, and the content thereof needs to represent the aspirations of all stakeholders in each ward. IDP acknowledges the interconnectedness of democracy, development, and service delivery. According to Section 26 of the Local Government Municipal Systems Act, 2000 (Act No. 32 of 2000), the core components of an integrated development plan must reflect:

- the municipality's long-term development, with a special emphasis on the municipality's most critical development and internal transformation needs;
- the municipality's current level of development, including the identification of groups that do not have access to basic municipal services;
- municipal council's development priorities and goals for its elected term, including local economic development targets and internal transformation desires.

The municipal council must ensure that IDP goes hand in hand with the Service Delivery Budget Implementation Plan (SDBIP) for plans to be successfully implemented. Zondi (2015) added that despite sound local government legislation, most local governments in South Africa still struggle to uphold human rights and provide basic services.

FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEMS LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN SERVICE DELIVERY

Lack of capacity

The lack of capacity or skills in local government affects the way local municipalities are run and therefore their ability to deliver on their mandate (Ndevu & Muller, 2017). The operational efficiency and effectiveness of local municipalities heavily rely on the capacity and skills possessed by the local government. Insufficient capacity or skills within the local government can significantly impact the delivery of their responsibilities. Consequently, the management and maintenance of infrastructure suffer, leading to a deterioration in its condition and an upsurge in service delivery protests. To assess the success of local governance, it is crucial to evaluate the ability of local government structures to adopt an integrated developmental approach towards social and economic issues. Municipalities should be able to identify and prioritise local needs, determine appropriate service levels, and allocate the necessary resources to fulfil the aspirations of society.

The provision of municipal services tailored to meet the specific requirements of a community is contingent upon the availability of adequate resources. Fourie and Van Der Waldt (2023) point out that it is vital to ensure strong consequences and that clear punitive measures are taken against municipalities that ignore or disregard obligations to engage communities because of a lack of skills and expertise. For municipalities to effectively respond to the evolving needs of their communities, each municipality must provide ongoing training and skill development opportunities for their officials. This will enable officials to remain informed and connected with the demographic shifts occurring within their respective communities.

Lack of accountability

When political office-bearers and officials in local municipalities fail to respond to complaints and queries from communities, it creates a sense of neglect and frustration and often leads to protests (Mamokhere, 2020). Local government can respond to the problems it faces only within the framework of its functions. This can limit the scope within which local government has to address these problems. It is also true that the problems seen in local government are not unique to this level of government but can be found at the provincial and national levels. Councillors must also promote transparency and openness in local government, building trust between citizens

and officials and fostering a culture of accountability, thereby developing strong, vibrant and inclusive communities (Fourie & Van Der Walldt, 2023).

Gumede (2021) points out that violent public protests indicate that ward committees are inadequate channels to express community concerns and frustrations. Therefore, if the problems within local government are to be fixed, they must also be fixed at the provincial and national levels. Shava and Mubangizi (2019) indicated that the poor basic service delivery in many South African municipalities has led to communities being forced to organise service delivery protests to demand accountability from government officials. Lebotsa (2022) asserts that many local government officials struggle to maintain public accountability because they are unfamiliar with the concept and unwilling to hold communities accountable for how public funds are spent.

Lack of proper communication strategy

Local governance refers to the administration that operates at the grassroots level, maintaining regular interaction with the local populace. The local citizens actively strive for increased avenues and improved means to facilitate communication between themselves and the local government. Effective communication strategies enable the local government to bridge the gap and establish closer ties with its citizens. These strategies foster a deeper comprehension of the local government's role within the community and its impact on the lives of the local people, citizens, and stakeholders. However, the local government's proficiency in effectively communicating and engaging with its constituents remains a significant challenge at the local level. Masiya *et al.* (2019) indicates that low public participation results from limited or no collaboration between municipalities and local government officials in integrated development planning.

Citizens believe that municipal decisions do not adequately address the needs and values of communities, particularly the poor and disadvantaged sectors, to the extent that planning, including budgets and Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), does not reflect community needs. Inadequate communication between municipal authorities and the residents they serve frequently gives rise to misinterpretations and discontent, which may culminate in demonstrations against service provision. The protests could have been avoided with an appropriate and effective communication strategy that would have informed people about the problems local governments face in delivering services (Mkhatshwa-Ngwenya & Khumalo, 2020).

Political appointments

Local government dysfunctionality in South Africa has taken various forms, most notably a lack of political and managerial will to make sound appointments, act decisively on contentious issues, fail to adopt municipal budgets, fail to obtain qualified audits, and fail to communicate with and respond to the needs of local communities (Vilakazi & Adetiba, 2020). The National Development Plan (NDP) admits that party-political intervention in decision-making and political appointments has caused 'turbulence that has undermined the morale of public servants and citizens' confidence in the public institution, and municipalities have not been spared in this situation. In part, the lack of true performance management originates with governing bodies that lack the political will to make the kinds of difficult decisions that are required to achieve substantial performance improvements in fields such as service delivery and instead redefine the issues as problems of mismanagement and inefficiency and then vow to hold the respective bureaucracies responsible (Koma, 2016). The challenge faced in South Africa is the continued practice of filling important roles in the municipal service based on political connections. This is also why it appears that the same senior municipal officials rotate from one top-ranking position to another because only they can be politically trusted (Mngomezulu, 2020). Even in the post-COVID-19 era, the separation of politics and public administration remains a source of contention (Cheung, 2022). Service delivery is usually compromised by the appointments of individuals lacking the necessary expertise in some form or another.

ENHANCING SERVICE DELIVERY AT THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL: APPROACHES AND STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Efforts to enhance service delivery at the local government level have become increasingly important in recent years. Local governments play a crucial role in providing essential services to their communities, such as healthcare, education, transportation, and public safety. However, there is often room for improvement in the

efficiency and effectiveness of these services. To address this, various strategies can be implemented to optimise service delivery and ensure the community's needs are met. One strategy to improve service delivery at the local government level is implementing technology-driven solutions. Embracing digital platforms and automation can streamline processes, reduce manuscript work, and enhance communication between government agencies and citizens.

For example, introducing online portals for service requests and feedback can expedite response times and provide a convenient channel for citizens to voice their concerns or suggestions. A municipality must possess a robust infrastructure investment and a sustainable economic development program incorporated into the Integrated Development Plan. Additionally, it is essential to establish and maintain all fundamental municipal policies and systems as mandated by law. The adoption of ongoing administrative reform and enhancement, as well as the increased and suitable utilisation of technology, should be implemented. Employees should be empowered through targeted and continuous professional skills development. The National Development Plan strongly advocates for local government to be considered a preferred career path. Adequate accountability and performance management mechanisms should be established for both councillors and officials.

Another approach is to prioritise citizen engagement and participation in decision-making processes. Local governments can gain valuable insights into their constituents' specific needs and preferences by involving the community in the planning and evaluation of services. This can be achieved through public consultations, surveys, and community forums. Engaging communities fosters a sense of ownership and accountability and ensures that services are tailored to meet the population's diverse needs. Furthermore, local governments can enhance service delivery by investing in staff capacity building and training programs. Providing employees with the necessary skills and knowledge to perform their duties effectively can improve service quality and customer satisfaction. The practice of excluding diverse voices and perspectives can limit innovation and creativity in the sector (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2020). Training programs can focus on customer service, problem-solving, and effective communication, equipping staff with the tools they need to deliver services efficiently and professionally. Collaboration and partnerships with other government agencies, non-profit organisations, and private sector entities can also improve service delivery. Local governments can tap into innovative solutions and best practices by leveraging resources and expertise from various stakeholders. Collaborative efforts can lead to shared knowledge, improved coordination, and, ultimately, better outcomes for the community. Including a broad range of stakeholders in decision-making can bring new ideas and approaches to the table, leading to more effective and sustainable solutions (Gargano, 2021). Enhancing service delivery at the local government level requires a multi-faceted approach. By embracing technology, engaging citizens, investing in staff capacity, and fostering collaboration, local governments can strive towards delivering efficient and effective services that meet the needs of their communities. Community participation is a practice that empowers citizens to have a say in municipal affairs through information sharing, consultation, and mobilisation aimed at informing and persuading a municipality and its policies (Shannon & O'Leary, 2020). These strategies can pave the way for a more responsive and accountable local government, ultimately enhancing the population's well-being. Researchers suggest conducting further investigations in various district municipalities across South Africa, particularly in Limpopo Province, to validate the results of this study.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This manuscript underscored important matters relevant to local authorities' constitutional responsibilities and duties. It has been noted from the aforementioned details that local governments across the country are experiencing a growing need for enhanced services and are facing competition for resources. To achieve this, politicians need to demonstrate commitment and actively participate in positively influencing local government processes to provide organisational solutions and promote the institutionalisation of constitutional values and principles. Additionally, a skills assessment should be conducted to determine an individual's capacity before appointing or deploying qualified personnel, and capacity building should be carried out to address any identified gaps. Municipalities are mandated by law to provide services such as water and sanitation, as well as involve communities in setting developmental priorities. Nevertheless, the low public satisfaction with government performance suggests that citizens are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with local governance. This research has examined the prerequisites for effective service delivery in local municipalities within the Vhembe district municipality and recommended strategies that can be used to improve service delivery in municipalities within the Vhembe District, such as;

- **Community Engagement and Feedback Mechanisms:**

The municipality should establish platforms for the community to provide feedback on municipal services. The community must utilise technology such as mobile apps, online surveys, and social media to gather input and be involved in decision-making processes related to service delivery. VDM has introduced the Mayoral Imbizo (gathering) every quarter to meet community members and discuss matters that affect them. Improving service delivery in municipalities requires a multifaceted approach that addresses various aspects of governance, management, technology, and community engagement. Involving citizens in local decision-making processes is crucial for promoting transparency and reducing corruption. Utilizing tools such as public consultations, citizen committees, and participatory budgeting can facilitate this objective. Enhancing citizen engagement and participation in decision-making processes is key to ensuring that community needs and concerns are met, and that local officials are responsible for providing services.

- **Performance Measurement and Monitoring:**

The municipality must implement key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure the effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery and monitor performance against established benchmarks regularly. Municipalities should also use data analytics to identify areas for improvement and allocate resources effectively.

- **Capacity Building and Training:**

Municipalities should invest in training programs for municipal staff to enhance their service delivery and problem-solving skills.

- **Reduce Bureaucracy:**

Municipalities must reduce red tape and bureaucracy by simplifying administrative processes. Start implementation of online portals for services such as permit applications, payment processing, and complaints. Quarterly review and update outdated regulations and policies that hinder efficient service delivery.

- **Infrastructure Investment and Maintenance:**

Municipalities should allocate sufficient resources for maintaining and upgrading municipal infrastructure such as roads, bridges, water supply, and sewage systems. Prioritise projects according to IDP based on their impact on service delivery and community needs.

- **Transparency and Accountability**

Municipalities must ensure transparency in decision-making processes related to service delivery. As supported by the Local Government: Municipal Finance Management Act 53 of 2003, a municipality must publish relevant information such as budgets, expenditures, and performance reports for public scrutiny. The municipal Council must hold municipal officials accountable for poor service delivery and not achieving set targets. The manuscript suggests that imposing repercussions for corrupt conduct is essential in mitigating corruption within South African municipalities. This entails guaranteeing that individuals proven guilty of corruption are subjected to suitable legal consequences, such as incarceration and asset confiscation. Furthermore, advocating for transparency and accountability in municipal administration can aid in diminishing corruption and guaranteeing equitable and effective allocation of resources.

- **Collaboration and Partnerships:**

Municipality should Collaborate with other levels of government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and community-based organisations to leverage resources and expertise. Engage in partnerships with businesses and academia to foster innovation and knowledge sharing. Encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in local government matters as enshrined in Section 152 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996.

- **Use of Technology and Innovation:**

Municipalities should embrace technology solutions such as geographic information systems (GIS), the Internet of Things (IoT), and smart city applications to improve service delivery. Implement digital platforms for service scheduling, asset management, and monitoring. By adopting these strategies, municipalities can enhance their capacity to deliver quality services that meet the needs and expectations of their communities. Hence, it is

imperative to continuously enhance service delivery mechanisms to adapt to evolving social media platforms. These platforms can also be utilised to promote community participation and safeguard freedom of speech, catering to the citizens' needs and demands. Unfortunately, numerous municipalities in South Africa persistently fail to fulfil their constitutional obligations. The practice of returning unspent budgets to the Treasury has become commonplace. One key contributing factor to this issue is the lack of necessary skills and capacity among municipal officials. This manuscript has identified several challenges municipalities face in providing services and indicates the importance of local government service delivery.

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