

Making dysfunctional municipalities functional: towards a framework for improving municipal service delivery performance in South African municipalities

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Abstract

Local government is underpinned by the principle that finding sustainable ways to meet the needs of communities through service delivery matters. Post 1994, the South African government opted for a 'developmental' local government system as a way of addressing the socio-economic challenges of historically disadvantaged communities. However, the scholarly discourse on service delivery in South Africa repeatedly highlights disappointing municipal performance. This study examined the need for performance evaluation of municipal service delivery in South Africa. Using a mixed methods approach and purposive sampling to collect data from 36 municipal managers of dysfunctional municipalities, the findings revealed that municipal performance was not evaluated satisfactorily; service delivery backlogs persisted and the impacts of deficient services on communities were not evaluated by either municipalities or communities. These findings justify a need for an effective evaluation framework for measuring municipal performance to assist municipalities to identify service delivery challenges and promote necessary change and improvement.

Keywords: Service delivery, dysfunctional municipalities, local government, developmental local government, evaluation framework

Introduction

Municipalities play a vital role in delivering essential services to citizens, fostering local economic growth, and promoting sustainable development. However, many South African municipalities face significant challenges in fulfilling these responsibilities, resulting in widespread service delivery failures and societal discontent (Mabeba 2021b). The consequences of dysfunctional municipalities are far-reaching, affecting the well-being of citizens, hindering economic development, and undermining

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trust in local government. The concept of functionality/dysfunctionality is central in understanding municipal performance, with dysfunctional municipalities characterised by inadequate service delivery, poor governance, and deficient resource management (Khaile 2023).

For this paper, functionality is framed through the lens of the ‘Five Pillars of Municipal Functionality’ model, which is an adaptation of various international frameworks and models for assessing municipal performance (Chamberlain and Masiangoako 2021). The pillars encompass governance and leadership (compliance with laws and regulations); financial management (expenditure management and budgeting as well as financial reporting and transparency); service delivery (access to basic services such as water, sanitation, electricity and waste management as well as service delivery backlogs and response times); infrastructure management (investment in new infrastructure and upgrades as well as maintenance planning); and effective communication and stakeholder engagement (Local Government Municipal Systems Act 2000; Municipal Finance Management Act 2003; Chamberlain and Masiangoako 2021). In addition to the Five Pillars, municipal functionality also involves economic development and growth, environmental management, social development and spatial planning and land use, which intersect with and support the core pillars (Chamberlain and Masiangoako 2021).

In assessing functionality, this paper also reflects global benchmarks and models such as the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the World Bank’s City Development Strategy (CDS) framework, the International City/County Management Association’s (ICMA) Local Government Performance Measurement framework and the Commonwealth Local Government Forum’s (CLGF) Municipal Service Delivery Performance Measurement framework (World Bank 2018; International City/County Management Association 2018; Commonwealth Local Government Forum 2013). These frameworks provide a set of universal, measurable, and achievable targets that can be applied to municipal service delivery. They can therefore inform the development of comprehensive and objective criteria for evaluating municipal functionality in South Africa, aligned with global best practices and standards.

Principal objectives of local government include increasing the quality of services provided and improving the responsiveness of governments to the concerns of the public (Mabeba 2021a). Tamrakar (2010) observes that people in developing countries still experienced many hurdles to access local government services, which are often characterised as ineffective; too procedural, cumbersome and red-taped; costly; and lacking transparency. Tamrakar (2010) posited that municipal services should focus on what communities want rather than what providers are prepared to give.

In South Africa, citizens have continued to demand better services and a better life from local government as evidenced by the spate of service delivery protests by communities for poor or inadequate provision of services such as water, electricity, and housing (Mabeba 2021a). Kariuki and Reddy (2017) argue that local governments in South Africa are overwhelmed by challenges in service

delivery and need to be more innovative in overcoming the challenges involved. Gwayi (2010) identifies the following as contributing to those challenges: interference by councillors in administrative issues; lack of alignment between the needs of communities and municipal budgets; lack of leadership from municipal officials and political leaders; inadequate public participation; inadequate infrastructure; and shortages of skills. Meanwhile, the South African Institute for Race Relations (2016) asserts the following as indicators for determining the performance of a municipality: the poverty rate; unemployment rate; families whose houses are electrified; families whose houses have piped water; families whose refuse is removed by the municipality, and families with access to a flush or chemical toilet. However, issues such as poverty and unemployment rates may be attributed more to wider economic forces than to factors within the local government's control.

Despite the importance to South Africa of having functional municipalities to deliver basic services and promote development, and while research has explored various aspects of municipal service delivery, there is no comprehensive evaluation framework that integrates multiple dimensions of municipal service delivery performance, including governance, finance, infrastructure, and community engagement. The need for context-specific solutions that address the unique challenges and context of South African dysfunctional municipalities is the gap this study aims to fill.

Roles and responsibilities of local government in South Africa

At the dawn of South Africa's democracy in 1994, effective local government was perceived as essential to improve the standard of living for most citizens by providing them with basic services (South African Local Government Association 2015). This led to the 1998 White Paper on Local Government (Republic of South Africa 1998b) that proposed a framework for 'developmental' local government that would address deficiencies in infrastructure and service delivery, and tackle poverty and disadvantage. The responsibilities of local government are set out in several pieces of legislation that include the Constitution, Local Government Municipal Structures Act 1998, Local Government Municipal Systems Act 2000, Municipal Finance Management Act 2003, and Intergovernmental Relations Act 2005. Schedules 4B and 5B of the Constitution provide an overview of areas within local government's jurisdiction and the Constitution provides municipalities with the required legislative and executive powers for fulfilling these functions.

Section 152(1) stipulates that municipalities should engage and be accountable to local communities; ensure that communities are provided with the services they demand in a sustainable manner; enhance the social and economic development of communities; ensure the provision of a safe and healthy environment; and encourage community participation in local government issues (Republic of South Africa Constitution 1996). Section 153 details the developmental responsibilities of municipalities which include the need for sound administrative, budgeting and planning processes that focus on provision of the basic needs of communities as well as the social and economic development of citizens.

Accordingly, the Municipal Systems Act emphasises the need for municipalities to give priority to the basic needs and development of local communities, and to ensure equitable access to municipal services for vulnerable groups. Furthermore, municipalities should reduce poverty, address inequalities in economic opportunities, and ensure inclusive decision-making processes that improve citizen-local government relations (Ramodula and Govender 2020).

Challenges facing South African municipalities in service delivery

Reforming local government in South Africa post-apartheid presented numerous transitional challenges. These can be grouped into three categories, namely institutional, administrative, and socio-political. Institutional challenges included merging former apartheid-era local authorities, homeland administrations and other local institutions into newly defined municipalities; establishing democratic structures, such as councils and ward committees; and building capacity and expertise (Thornhill 2008; Koma 2012; Tshishonga 2019). Administrative challenges included managing limited resources, debt, and service backlogs; addressing apartheid-era policies, laws, and practices; implementing new financial management systems; as well as upgrading and maintaining ageing infrastructure (Thornhill 2008). Socio-political challenges included building trust and participatory mechanisms with previously marginalised communities; redressing apartheid-era spatial planning and infrastructure disparities; managing power struggles, coalition municipal governments and conflicting interests; and combating entrenched corrupt practices and mismanagement (Thornhill 2008).

To address these challenges the Municipal Systems Act of 2000 established a new overarching framework for developmental local government (Koma 2012; Tshishonga 2019), but changes in legislation, policies, and regulations post 2000 have created uncertainty and further challenges for municipalities. An increased focus on service delivery and performance management has put pressure on municipalities to adapt and this has proved difficult. Decentralisation of functions has highlighted lack of capacity, inadequate resource allocation, and uneven service delivery. Many municipalities are inadequately staffed and lack expertise resulting in part from politicised ‘cadre deployment’ (Siddle and Koelble 2016), leading over the years to deterioration of service provision (Managa 2012). The scarcity of skills for managerial and technical positions is particularly evident in most rural municipalities where such positions may remain vacant for a considerable period, yet these are the areas where communities yearn for basic service delivery (Managa 2012). Furthermore, lack of skills in project management has resulted in underspending allocated funds, preventing projects from taking off or getting completed.

Clearly, ongoing support and reform are necessary to ensure effective, efficient, and democratic local government in South Africa. In 1997, the government introduced a new framework known as *Batho Pele* (‘people first’), aimed at encouraging government employees to focus on providing excellent service to citizens. In 2004 Project Consolidate was initiated to assist municipalities struggling with

expertise to discharge their mandate; it also focused on policy refinement and clarification on basic service delivery issues for municipalities that were in distress (Hargreaves 2010; Govender and Naidu 2011; Good Governance Learning Network 2012). More recently, the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) has initiated several attempts to improve municipal performance including the 'Local Government Turn Around Strategy' in which provincial departments of local government are expected to improve their oversight responsibilities and support municipalities to improve accountability, communication, performance and the participation of communities in municipal planning (CoGTA 2010). Later, the Back-to-Basics programme (B2B) was introduced by the national government to strengthen municipalities, improve service delivery and enhance economic growth and development at the local level (CoGTA 2014). Other initiatives include CoGTA's Capacity Building Programme which offers training for municipal officials on governance, administration and service delivery (CoGTA 2014); and the National Treasury's Municipal Finance Management Programme, which provides training and support for municipal officials on financial management.

However, regardless of these measures, basic service delivery has not improved in many municipalities in South Africa and service delivery protests by communities continue, putting local government under the spotlight (Bohler-Muller et al. 2016). Protests also reflect the different challenges and issues from one part of the country to another, with variable socio-economic conditions and municipal effectiveness (CoGTA 2009). McLaughlin and Batley (2012) emphasise the significance of citizen-local government relations and agreements between both parties as crucial in ensuring that services meet community needs, and that accountability is established.

It seems evident that the existing evaluation instruments for assessing municipal performance, notably the Municipal Performance Management Regulations Framework which sets standards for municipal performance; Municipal Performance Index; and Auditor-General Performance Audit Reports which evaluate municipal service delivery and financial management, have not produced the expected improvement. Poor performance in public finance management and accounting procedures is a particular concern (Siddle and Koelble 2016). In 2018, only 33 out of 278 municipalities received a clean audit (Auditor-General South Africa 2018), and the Auditor-General's report for 2019–2020 noted that only 27 municipalities had improved their audit outcomes, while 39 regressed (Auditor-General South Africa 2020).

Managa (2012) argues that political elites including municipal managers continue to enrich themselves with state resources and are offered employment in government without having relevant skills and experience; and that corruption undermines the values of the South African Constitution. Deficiencies in governance that result in poor service delivery include lack of community engagement; indifference to the needs of communities; poor management systems and skills utilisation; lack of a culture of excellence; and an unsupportive institutional environment without sufficient oversight and

accountability (Ntsala and Mahlatji 2016; Masiya et al. 2021). This is made worse by the politics of access – patronage, nepotism and gatekeeping – and poor treatment of community members by officials. Municipalities often exhibit negative power struggles; conflict between municipal officials and community leaders; lack of trust among councillors from different political parties; and a tense and bureaucratic environment (Ntsala and Mahlatji 2016; Masiya et al. 2021). The distinction between political and administrative roles has become unclear, with politicians interfering in administrative tasks and decisions being driven by political agendas (Masiya et al. 2021; Pakkles 2022).

Methodology

This study was underpinned by the Institutional Theory, which provides a robust framework for understanding the complex dynamics underlying municipal service delivery performance. It posits that institutions, comprising formal and informal rules, norms, and expectations, shape behaviour and outcomes within organisations (Greenwood et al. 2017; Battilana and D’Aunno 2017). In the context of municipalities, Institutional Theory offers valuable insights into the interplay between formal structures, informal practices, and external pressures influencing service delivery performance.

Formal institutions, such as laws, policies, and regulations, establish the framework for municipal operations. However, their effectiveness depends on the extent to which they are implemented and enforced. In South African municipalities, formal institutions are often compromised by inadequate capacity, corruption, and political interference (Reddy 2018). In dysfunctional municipalities, informal institutions may perpetuate inefficient practices, patronage, and corruption (Mbeki 2016). In addition, the broader institutional environment, comprising national policies, provincial oversight, and community expectations, influences municipal behaviour. In South Africa, the institutional environment is characterised by a complex web of national and provincial regulations, which can create conflicting demands and constraints for municipalities (Republic of South Africa 1996).

Data was collected using qualitative and quantitative methods. The study employed the purposive-judgemental sampling technique – selecting participants who possess knowledge which would enable them to respond to research questions of a given issue under study (Teddlie and Yu 2007; Abrams 2010). Thirty-six municipal managers from five provinces made up the sample, drawn from local municipalities that have been deemed to be dysfunctional and where service delivery protests from communities have been common. The sampled municipalities were deemed dysfunctional based on the CoGTA risk-adjusted framework, which provides an objective basis for identifying distressed and dysfunctional municipalities. It considers a range of indicators including governance and administration, financial management, service delivery performance, infrastructure and performance as well as economic development and growth (CoGTA 2021). The 2021 State of Local Government report identified 64 municipalities as dysfunctional due to poor governance, financial mismanagement, and inadequate service delivery (CoGTA 2021). These indicators are aligned with the CoGTA’s Local

Government Turnaround Strategy (CoGTA 2019) and the Municipal Finance Management Act. Municipal managers were selected as the sample because of their leadership role.

Questions containing both closed and open-ended questions were distributed to 40 municipal managers in the provinces of Gauteng, Northern Cape, North West, Mpumalanga and Kwa-Zulu Natal: 36 responded to the survey. The questionnaire contained questions designed to gather information on challenges, backlogs, and performance in service delivery as well as the impact on communities and their needs and concerns.

As well, telephone interviews which were conversational in nature were conducted with nine municipal managers, the aim being to understand their narratives without losing focus on the purpose of the study (Marshall and Rossman 2006; Caton and Santos 2009). The researcher asked open-ended questions with follow-up questions to probe key points. Interviews when compared to questionnaires tend to be more effective in eliciting data and enable researchers to probe participants on issues that the researcher had not previously identified (Busetto et al. 2020). The inductive analytical method was used for qualitative data to identify patterns in the data (Braun and Clarke 2006; Bengtsson 2016).

Questionnaire and interview findings

This section presents findings from the questionnaire results and the interviews under the following categories: service delivery challenges; service delivery backlogs; measurable outputs and targets; evaluation and monitoring performance; impact of service; community needs and concerns.

Service delivery challenges

The questionnaire asked participants to indicate whether their municipality had service delivery challenges. Table 1 shows that 31 respondents (86.1%) disagreed with the statement that the municipality did *not* have service delivery challenges; while only five respondents (13.9%) stated that they had none.

Table 1: “My municipality has no major service delivery challenges to the community”

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly disagree	6	16.7
Disagree	25	69.4
Agree	5	13.9
Total	36	100.0

Further detail was gained from the interviews. Six interviewees (66.7%) attributed the challenges to problems in operating conditions such as the inadequate capacity of municipal officials; ineffective financial management; insufficient funding; deficiencies in leadership skills; inadequate citizen engagement to enable communities to identify the services they require; and various forms of corruption – manipulation of tender processes, bribery and extortion, nepotism and favouritism, misappropriation

of municipal resources, and collusion with external entities to commit fraud against municipalities. The following remarks were typical:

Manager A: *The general lack of leadership capacity at municipal management level is a serious issue that affects issues of planning, resulting in poor or non-delivery of services in our municipality.*

Manager E: *As managers, we do not involve the communities in identifying services they need and how these services could improve their lives. We decide for them only to find that what we identified as a need for the community is of little value to them hence, we find many service delivery demonstrations in our municipality.*

Manager C: *We are facing challenges in areas such as the provision of electricity, water and refuse collection but we are committed to transparency and community engagement as we work to address these challenges.*

Manager F: *While we strive for excellence, we acknowledge some service delivery challenges, particularly on issues such as inadequate infrastructure, financial constraints, corruption and mismanagement, political interference, and community unrest and protests.*

Table 2 summarises challenges known to face municipalities across key areas of infrastructure and service provision, highlighting the challenges of finding effective solutions.

Table 2: Municipal infrastructure reliability by service type in South Africa

Water	Sanitation	Electricity	Solid Waste	Roads and Stormwater
<p>Access to a trustworthy water supply is limited to 64% of households. (Dept of Water and Sanitation).</p> <p>Non-revenue water, primarily resulting from maintenance backlogs and inefficiencies, is estimated to cost approximately R9.9 billion annually.</p> <p>44% of water treatment plants are struggling to operate effectively.</p>	<p>56% of wastewater treatment infrastructure is classified as poor or critical (Department of Water and Sanitation).</p> <p>Municipalities have faced legal consequences, with several being convicted in court for causing sewage pollution.</p>	<p>An estimated R10 billion is lost each year due to non-revenue electricity (National Treasury).</p> <p>Municipal electricity infrastructure is in a deplorable condition.</p>	<p>In 2020/2021, 55% of landfill sites failed to meet compliance requirements, with only 45% achieving compliance. (Department of Environmental Affairs and Forestry).</p>	<p>Municipal roads are plagued by potholes, various types of cracks (crocodile, linear, and block), and blading, highlighting their poor state.</p> <p>A large number of municipalities lack robust data on road conditions and pavement management.</p>

Source: Schoeman and Chakwizira (2023).

Service delivery backlogs

Participants were asked whether their municipality had service delivery backlogs. Table 3 shows that 29 respondents (80.6%) agreed that this was the case, while four (11.1%) disagreed with the statement and three (8.3%) were undecided.

Table 3: “The municipality has service delivery backlogs”

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	9	25.0
Agree	20	55.6
Disagree	4	11.1
Undecided	3	8.3
Total	36	100.0

The interviews confirmed that the backlogs were sparking community protests as residents were of the view that municipalities were not making enough effort to address them. Some interviewees felt that communities lacked trust and confidence in the ability of municipalities to effectively address this challenge. Comments including the following:

Manager D: Community leaders seem to have lost confidence in us, and they perceive the municipality as lacking interest in solving community challenges. I have often been asked by some residents if I was keen on improving the lives of ordinary people.

Manager B: Our backlogs are largely due to historical underinvestment and inadequate maintenance. We are developing a long-term plan to address this, but it will take time and resources.

As an example, Table 4 shows that 1.7 million households in South Africa did not have access to piped water in 2016, demonstrating the severity of service delivery backlogs in some South African municipalities, and the resulting impact on quality of life for communities.

Table 4: Backlogs in household access to piped water by province, 2016

Province	Access to piped water	No access to piped water	Total	Backlog (percent)
Western Cape	1,914,055	19,822	1,933,876	1.0
Gauteng	4,826,194	124,943	4,951,137	2.5
Free State	910,582	36,056	946,638	3.8
Northern Cape	333,408	20,301	353,709	5.7
Mpumalanga	1,090,892	147,969	1,238,861	11.9
North West	1,074,968	173,799	1,248,766	13.9
Kwa-Zulu Natal	2,457,350	418,493	2,875,843	14.6
Limpopo	1,280,077	321,066	1,601,083	20.0
Eastern Cape	1,331,228	442,167	1,773,395	24.9
South Africa	15,218,754	1,704,556	16,923,309	8.8

Source: Statistics South Africa (2016).

Table 5 presents the bigger picture, summarising the scale of a range of basic service delivery backlogs, often cited as evidence of municipal underperformance. This puts intense pressure on municipalities to address longstanding problems.

Table 5: Backlogs of basic municipal services in South Africa

Basic municipal services	Number of households receiving below basic levels	Percentages
Water	2,167,520	15.0%
Sanitation	3,843,735	26.6%
Electricity	3,401,838	26.1%
Refuse removal	4,998,787	37.9%

Source: Statistics South Africa (2012).

Measurable outputs and targets

Participants were asked whether there were measurable outputs and targets for services provided to communities. Table 6 shows that only three respondents (8.3%) agreed that their municipality had clear, measurable outputs and targets for service delivery, while 29 respondents (80.6%) disagreed with the statement. This finding points to a lack of thorough service delivery planning by municipal officials, which could affect outputs and the achievement of targets, resulting in unsatisfactory services.

Table 6: “Services delivered by the municipality have clear outputs and targets that are measurable”

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	1	2.8
Agree	2	5.5
Strongly disagree	10	27.8
Disagree	19	52.8
Undecided	4	11.1
Total	36	100.0

In the open-ended section of the questionnaire, 25 respondents (69.4%) suggested that there was a need for municipalities to employ qualified planners who could ensure that thorough planning took place during the preliminary stages of a service delivery task, and that all aspects of a service were addressed before implementation. Some participants indicated that incorporating prototyping in the service development process would allow real-life interaction with communities, to create a more effective, user friendly, and successful service. The use of technology to improve service delivery was also suggested by some participants.

Evaluation and monitoring of performance

Participants were asked to indicate whether municipal service delivery was monitored and evaluated. Table 7 shows that nine participants (25%) agreed that this was taking place, while 27 participants (75%) disagreed.

Table 7: “Service delivery performance is monitored and evaluated”

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	1	2.8
Agree	8	22.2
Strongly disagree	5	13.9
Disagree	22	61.1
Total	36	100.0

The lack of monitoring and evaluation was corroborated by interviewees. The following comments were typical:

Manager F: Monitoring and evaluation of the service delivery process hardly takes place unless perhaps there is a protest by the community where they specify what they are not happy about regarding a certain service.

Manager B: Monitoring and evaluation of service delivery processes have not been given the importance they deserve but we acknowledge their importance. People need to be trained in how they can effectively evaluate and monitor processes if funds permit.

These comments suggest that services are just implemented without checking if everything is proceeding according to plan, and that municipalities are not identifying challenges that need to be addressed to ensure that set targets are achieved.

Impact of services

Participants were asked whether the impact of services was evaluated by both the municipality and community. Table 8 shows that only three participants (8.3%) agreed this was happening, while 29 participants (80.6%) disagreed. From this result, it was evident that communities were not being given an opportunity to evaluate the impact of a service provided by their municipality. This was echoed by interviewees, with 6 participants (66.7%) indicating that the impact of services was hardly evaluated by the municipality let alone the community.

Table 8: “Service impact to the community is evaluated by both the municipality and community”

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	3	8.3
Strongly disagree	5	13.9
Disagree	24	66.7
Undecided	4	11.1
Total	36	100.0

The following were some of the comments from interviewees:

Manager B: To be honest, we do not really have a formal process in place to evaluate the impact of our services on the community. We focus more on delivering the services and meeting our targets, but we do not really assess how it affects the community.

Manager D: *We do not have the capacity or resources to conduct evaluations or assessments of our service impact. We rely on feedback from community meetings and complaints to gauge how we are doing.*

Manager F: *We are aware that we need to do more to evaluate our service impact, but that is not a priority for us right now. We are focused on meeting our basic service delivery obligations and do not have resources to take it further.*

This suggests that the community was regarded as a passive recipient of a municipal service and community feedback was not regarded as important by many municipalities. However, some participants indicated that their municipality had suggestion boxes where community members were free to comment on the impact of services; and some recommended utilising cost-effective feedback tools like WhatsApp, free phone calls, and verbal face-to-face verbal feedback.

Community needs and concerns

The question here was whether service delivery evaluation instruments used by municipalities accurately reflected the needs and concerns of communities. Table 9 shows that 30 respondents (83.3%) indicated that their current evaluation instruments failed to do so.

Table 9: “The service delivery evaluation instrument used by my municipality reflects the needs and concerns of the community”

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly disagree	21	58.3
Disagree	9	25.0
Agree	6	16.7
Total	36	100

Some interviewees reported that not all municipalities had service delivery evaluation instruments, while others indicated that attempts were made to align evaluation instruments with community needs and concerns, but it was not easy as needs varied from community to community. Also, evaluation instruments varied, and might be designed by different entities including municipal officials, external consultants and provincial or national government departments, or through collaborations between municipalities and research institutions or civil society organisations. Finding or designing an appropriate instrument could be problematic. Nevertheless, the continuing service delivery protests were a reflection that not enough was being done in this area. Typical comments were as follows:

Manager E: *As a municipality we are currently reviewing our instrument to better align it with community needs, but it is a work in progress.*

Manager G: *While the instrument covers some community needs, it does not adequately address the unique challenges faced by our rural areas.*

Manager C: *I am not sure if our instrument fully captures community concerns, but we are trying our best with limited resources.*

Manager A: *The current instrument is too focused on internal processes and does not capture the real issues affecting our community.*

Manager D: *We are not aware of any suitable service delivery evaluation instruments or have not found one that suits our municipality's needs.*

Manager B: *Our municipality has other priorities, such as infrastructure development, or financial management, and service delivery evaluation is not a current focus.*

The responses highlight a need for a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to service delivery evaluation, one that better aligns with the unique needs and challenges faced by different communities. These findings have important implications for municipal policy and practice, emphasising the need for a revised evaluation instrument that truly reflects community needs and priorities (see below under Proposed Framework).

Discussion

Despite a plethora of capacity building initiatives and support activities from the national and provincial governments, many South African municipalities remain distressed, partly because of the design and coordination gaps that hinder successful implementation of service delivery programmes (Kariuki and Reddy 2017). An argument that has been put forward is that there has been a lack of focus with no coherent approach to develop municipal capacity: a failure by national and provincial governments to develop a cohesive plan and present a unified approach when engaging with municipalities (Govender and Reddy 2014; Kariuki and Reddy 2017). Although the constitutional and legislative basis for monitoring municipal performance exists, there has been a lack of support for an integrated minimum floor of norms and standards of performance for municipalities to function efficiently and effectively in providing services (Koma 2010). The few norms and standards that do exist are scattered across several entities and departments, resulting in the absence of a holistic picture.

South African municipalities face numerous challenges in delivering basic services to communities, including inadequate infrastructure, poor governance, and insufficient resources. Service delivery requires responsiveness to citizens and stakeholders from service providers, policy-makers and managers to make them answerable and ensure that service standards are adhered to and that where necessary appropriate changes are made to service delivery (Caseley 2006; Asis and Woolcock 2015). The findings of this study unequivocally highlight the need for a comprehensive service delivery evaluation framework in South African municipalities, particularly those that are deemed to be dysfunctional based on performance metrics that include service delivery outcomes and sound financial management, as well as audit findings. The lack of effective evaluation frameworks has contributed to the persistence of service delivery challenges, compromising quality of life for communities. Currently used frameworks face problems such as insufficient data quality and availability, lack of clear indicators and benchmarks, and inconsistent application and enforcement. A robust framework, properly used, would ensure that officials are held accountable for service delivery performance, and help to pinpoint

specific challenges and weaknesses. Furthermore, it would provide empirical evidence for data-driven decision-making and could encourage expanded community participation in service delivery planning and evaluation.

In the local government context, the provision of services may be enabled or constrained depending on prevailing circumstances. McLoughlin and Batley (2012) argue that while some of the factors involved, such as corruption, patronage or broader issues of political economy may be beyond the direct control of municipalities, they nonetheless affect service provision. Study participants identified a wide range of both internal and external factors as challenges that municipalities face in their attempts to deliver satisfactory services to communities; hence these should be fully evaluated to determine how they positively or negatively affect service delivery. McLoughlin and Batley (2012) also emphasise the significance of citizen-local government relations in determining the quality of service delivery, highlighting the need for a clear agreement on the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders in controlling and delivering services, including decisions on which services to prioritise, how services will be delivered, who will be responsible for delivery and how citizens will be involved in decision-making processes.

In the South African context, municipalities are expected to be developmentally oriented and local government should propel the agenda of reducing poverty. The White Paper on Local Government (Republic of South Africa 1998b) asserts that it is important to capacitate local government and ensure that its developmental role is realised. Furthermore, the White Paper states that the vision for developmental local government is based on collaboration between municipalities and local communities to find solutions that result in the improvement of the standard of life for communities. It emphasises the democratisation of development, empowering marginalised and excluded groups within communities, hence their input on the services they require would fulfil this vision. Service provision evaluation and monitoring should be able to provide municipalities with meaningful feedback which can assist municipalities in playing their developmental role. However, the findings of this study revealed that service delivery evaluation instruments used by municipalities did not accurately reflect the needs and concerns of communities. This demonstrates the need for an evaluation framework that would improve citizen satisfaction and trust. Effectively engaging citizen beneficiaries of services, including the poor, would assist municipalities to gain insights into services valued by ordinary people, and integrating their voice in development programmes would accelerate the achievement of effective service provision (World Bank 2013; Bester 2020).

By 2012, South Africa's service delivery backlogs had reached a staggering R42 billion, with the Eastern Cape province being the hardest hit (Statistics South Africa 2012). According to Statistics South Africa's 2012 report, a substantial 62.9% of the population still lacked access to adequate water supply, while sanitation backlogs remained a major concern. The burden on municipalities to provide these

services is immense. According to Koma (2010) and Coetzee (2010) a major part of the problem results from poor planning during the apartheid era when there was a lack of focus on development. But this does not excuse ongoing deficiencies in governance and management. Lack of skills among managers and staff is a key factor. Koma (2010) found that 31% of municipal managers possessed qualifications that were unrelated to finance, legal or public administration; 28% of chief financial officers did not have finance-related qualifications; 35% of technical managers were without engineering qualifications; and other municipal employees rarely had qualifications related to the jobs they held.

Section 72 of the Local Government Municipal Structures Act allows provinces to address municipal dysfunction, ensure service delivery, and restore stability in municipalities that are struggling to govern effectively. However, South African provincial governments have been criticised for not adequately fulfilling their role in supporting municipalities to become functional. Reasons for this failure include inadequate funding, lack of capacity building, insufficient oversight, political interference and ineffective coordination.

Proposed framework

Effective monitoring and evaluation of municipal services is vital to ensure timely identification of service delivery gaps and inefficiencies, improved responsiveness to community needs and concerns, enhanced accountability and trust between citizens and local government as well as better coordination and collaboration among stakeholders (Smit 2017). Recently, the South African government has been implementing the District Development Model (DDM), an initiative introduced in 2020, to address municipal service delivery backlogs through enhanced intergovernmental collaboration and coordination (Gumede 2020). More broadly, however, challenges in monitoring and evaluation persist: to date, the various initiatives of CoGTA, National Treasury, and the Auditor-General have proven insufficient to bridge a critical gap in the system of local government.

This research thus highlights the need for a standardised yet adaptable evaluation framework that balances consistency with community-specific tailoring. This approach could incorporate a range of proven models, allowing municipalities to select and tailor components to suit local needs. A collaborative initiative, led by national or provincial government agencies, local government associations, community representatives, and research experts, could facilitate the development of an effective and responsive evaluation instrument.

The proposed framework on Table 10 outlines a comprehensive approach to evaluating municipal service delivery performance, focussing on key dimensions that impact functionality. By applying this framework, municipalities could identify areas of strength and weaknesses, informing targeted interventions to enhance service delivery. The framework also seeks to foster capacity building through training, mentoring, and knowledge sharing; to improve municipal alignment with national policies,

legislation, and standards; and to promote interdepartmental and intergovernmental collaboration to address service delivery challenges. By building upon and improving existing tools, it seeks to bring about a more effective and comprehensive approach, ultimately supporting improved governance and service delivery.

Table 10: Proposed framework for evaluating municipal service delivery

Conducive environment	Resources, skills and service design	Service delivery model and implementation	Accountability for service delivery	Service outcomes
<p>Citizen participation in decision-making.</p> <p>Effective municipal leadership.</p> <p>Skilled and corruption-free representatives.</p> <p>Policy development – assessing the quality and relevance of policies guiding municipal service delivery.</p> <p>Public financial management: reviewing municipality’s financial management practices, including transparency, accountability, and compliance with regulations.</p> <p>Regulatory and legal guidelines.</p> <p>Supply chain: do we buy or make materials for service provision?</p> <p>Procurement guidelines.</p> <p>Collaboration among government spheres.</p> <p>Public’s trust in the municipality.</p>	<p>Funding – sources of funds; financial management capacity?</p> <p>Human capital: do municipal employees have required skills? What capacity development is required to deliver services effectively?</p> <p>Technology available to support service delivery?</p> <p>Service delivery design:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of community beneficiaries • Needs analysis – is service delivery sensitive to community needs? • Implementation planning – service standards, operation and maintenance plan? • Adequate monitoring and improvement system in place? • Design of feedback loops to determine changes and improvements of service? 	<p>Service delivery model selected:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Did community participate in the selection? ▪ Reasons for selection? ▪ Was there sufficient responsiveness to community needs/demands? ▪ Is the municipality providing the service or will a contractor: is private sector delivery justified? ▪ If the community will provide the service, or another innovative model was selected, why was this model chosen? ▪ Is there clarity of roles and responsibilities, and coordination of service delivery programmes. 	<p>Activities related to service delivery:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will the performance of the service provider be monitored? • How will quality control be ensured? • What will be the mechanisms for accountability of officials/service providers to the public? • Will there be effective checks and balances? • Will there be clear lines of accountability across spheres, coordination of oversight and monitoring functions? 	<p>Use of service:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coverage of service • Quality of service (eg RDP houses) • Is the service affordable? (eg water, electricity) • Reliability of service • Satisfaction of communities as beneficiaries and the impact of the service • How sustainable is the service? • Identification of problem areas • Measurement of programme results and extent to which service quality has changed after improvement efforts.

Conclusion

Following the end of apartheid and the ushering-in of democracy for all South Africans, addressing the developmental backlog, particularly within the local government sphere, became the top priority. However, more than two decades on, service delivery challenges have lingered, and many

municipalities appear to be dysfunctional. Addressing root causes of dysfunctionality and promoting sustainable improvements in municipal governance and service delivery requires strengthening governance and leadership; improving financial management; enhancing capacity and skills more broadly; and fostering community engagement and participation.

The absence of a service delivery performance evaluation framework can be seen as a significant barrier to achieving those outcomes and an important contributor to poor service delivery performance. This study highlighted the need for an evaluation instrument that would enable dysfunctional municipalities to improve. It has proposed a comprehensive and carefully designed evaluation framework that can be tailored to local circumstances and needs. It would cover five key dimensions of service provision: a conducive environment; resources, skills and service design; selecting and implementing a service delivery model; accountability for service delivery; and service outcomes. Enhanced communication and consultation with citizens is integral across all five dimensions. Above all, effective evaluation of performance is essential to enable municipalities to play their role as developmental local government, determining where and how improvements should be made to provide services that would improve the lives of communities.

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