

Service Delivery Challenges within Municipalities in the Capricorn District of Limpopo Province

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ABSTRACT Since 2009, there have been ongoing community protests in South Africa in relation to several issues, including housing, water, roads and bridges. These protests are an indication of the service delivery challenges confronting the government. This study sought to determine how service delivery challenges can be addressed at local government level, with specific reference to Limpopo Province. It aimed to identify the general problems affecting communities and the causes and effects of poor service delivery at the local government level. The study participants included officials from Polokwane, Aganang, Molemole and Blouberg Local Municipalities, Capricorn District Municipality and the Department of Cooperative Governance, Human Settlement and Traditional Affairs. The study identified serious service delivery challenges that require urgent attention and the participants expressed deep concern about perceptions of corruption and poor financial management. The study's conclusions and recommendations will hopefully assist Local Municipalities in Capricorn District, the Limpopo Provincial Government and National Government to improve service delivery to communities at local government level.

INTRODUCTION

Ultimately, the success of local governments in South Africa will largely be determined by the quality of the service provided to their respective local communities. In South Africa, the government is ultimately responsible and accountable for service delivery to local communities (Banking Association of South Africa 2014; National Treasury, presentation to TCF 2015). Government is therefore responsible for the delivery of goods and services to all citizens. Government institutions have been created for this purpose.

South Africa's Constitution provides for the establishment of three spheres of government: national, provincial and local government (City of Polokwane 2015). South Africa consists of:

- ♦ Category A: Six Metropolitan municipalities
- ♦ Category B: 231 Local municipalities
- ♦ Category C: 46 District municipalities

Section 152 of the Constitution sets the following objectives for local government:

- ♦ To provide a democratic and accountable government of local communities
- ♦ To ensure the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner
- ♦ To promote social and economic development
- ♦ To promote a safe and healthy environment, and to encourage the involvement of communities and community organizations in matters of local government (City of Polokwane 2015).

These objectives have been in place for approximately 14 years. Every part of the country now falls under the jurisdiction of a municipality, with many communities experiencing local and democratic government for the first time in the past decade (National Treasury, presentation to TFC 2009). Limpopo Province is one of nine provinces. It consists of the following five District Municipalities and 25 Local Municipalities.

- ♦ Mopani District: Tzaneen, Giyani, Maruleng, Letaba and Phalaborwa Municipalities.
- ♦ Vhembe District: Makhado, Thulamela, Mutale and Musina Municipalities.
- ♦ Sekhukhune District: Makhuduthamaga, Tubatse, Elias Motswaledi, Ephraim Mogale and Fetakgomo Municipalities.
- ♦ Waterberg District: Mogalakwena, Mookgopong, BelaBela, Thabazimbi, Lephalale and Modimolle Municipalities.
- ♦ Capricorn District: Polokwane, Aganang, Blouberg, Molemole and Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipalities.

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For the purpose of this research, the Capricorn District together with its Local Municipalities was used as the case study.

Significance of the Study

Local government is an important level of participatory democracy, where communities play an active role not only as the electorate, but also as endusers and consumers. They should therefore hold their municipal councils accountable for their actions (Bauer 2009: 28). Over the past several years, South Africans have grown accustomed to increased service delivery protests, which are often marred by violence (Mbele 2010: 52). It is clear that community expectations far outstrip the level of services provided by municipalities. From an academic point of view, this is still a new issue as municipalities were only formally established in 2000. This study aimed to determine some of the primary causes of service delivery challenges within municipalities in Limpopo Province, identify the impact of poor service delivery and make recommendations to address these challenges. The study will add to the body of knowledge in the academic field as well as inform government policy development and improvement.

Problem Investigated

After the 2009 elections in South Africa, service delivery protests erupted across the country in all nine provinces. Most of the complaints were related to water shortages, electricity issues, poor roads, housing and unemployment. In response, the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) conducted a Local Government assessment to identify the main causes of poor service delivery. The problems identified range from issues of poor government and accountability, to weak financial management, a high level of vacancies in critical senior management posts and, in some instances, inability to deliver even a core set of critical municipal services efficiently and effectively. This study aimed to identify both the causes and effects of service delivery challenges at the municipal level in South Africa, with specific reference to Limpopo Province and to offer recommendations to address these challenges. Arising from the above problem, this article poses the following questions:

- ♦ What are the causes of service delivery challenges within the local government sector in Limpopo Province?
- ♦ What is the impact of poor service delivery on local municipalities in the Capricorn District of Limpopo?
- ♦ What strategies could be applied to overcome service delivery challenges?

Literature Review

The literature review focuses on factors that may contribute to local municipalities' failure to deliver services effectively. These include, among others: financial capacity and management, municipal capacity, political/administrative functions at the municipal level, good governance and public participation.

A major financial challenge in many South African municipalities is inadequate collection of service charges due to widespread non-payment. However, it is reasonable to assume that there is a correlation between ability to pay and willingness to pay. Moreover, given limited administrative resources, it is likely that rate collections maximize yields by concentrating on the most accessible and better off ratepayers (Fjeldstad 2003: 8; Mbele 2010: 54). Financial management challenges confronting both provincial and local government include among others,

- ♦ Inadequate skills for planning, budgeting, financial management, expenditure management, credit control, debt management, risk management, and internal audit
- ♦ A poor interface between financial and non-financial information (in-year monitoring and quality annual reporting)
- ♦ Cash flow management
- ♦ A lack of systems to manage audit queries and recommendations by both internal and external auditors (Mbele 2010: 52)
- ♦ Inadequate systems to manage good governance practices (especially conflicts of interest and accountability frameworks) within provincial departments and municipalities
- ♦ Leadership and management inaction, especially in following up on audit queries from both internal and external auditors
- ♦ Inadequate administrative and political oversight to strengthen accountability and responsibility.

The competency of senior public servants, the nature and adequacy of their expertise,

knowledge, and capacity, is a recurring issue in public administration and is a central theme in contemporary proposals to enhance and modernize state capacity (Hood and Lodge 2004: 313-314).

Smaller local municipalities lack infrastructure and skilled staff and thus do not have the capacity to perform their functions. This includes basic treasury functions such as billing ratepayers and consumers of services and maintaining proper credit control systems (Mbele 2010: 53). A turnaround strategy has resource implications, but not if adequately addressed, the ideals of flagship campaigns such as clean audits cannot be achieved. The majority of municipalities have high vacancy rates and inadequate in-house training in strategic areas such as such finance and governance. Skills retention remains a challenge and it takes time to fill vacant posts. The biggest challenge is that municipal officials cannot divorce party politics from administration. Under normal circumstances, it takes two months to appoint a director but due to political interference the process can take up to six months (Mbele 2010: 53).

Bovaird and Löffler (2009: 217) explain that, good governance has eight major characteristics: it is participatory, consensus-oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, efficient, equitable and inclusive, and follows the rule of law. It ensures that corruption is minimized, the views of minorities are taken into account and the voices of the most vulnerable in society are heard in decision-making. It is also responsive to society's present and future needs. Good governance is a value in itself, but is also the most critical means of achieving the Millennium Development Goals, which include, the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, universal primary education, gender equality, the eradication of child mortality, the improvement of maternal health and effective service delivery.

The effects of service delivery refer to the consequences or the impact on the community of government's delivery or failure to deliver services (Löffler 2009: 217). Since 2009, South Africa has witnessed ongoing community protests against the local and central government in relation to several issues, including housing, water, roads and bridges. These protests are an indication that service delivery challenges have negative effects on communities. Many citizens have become impatient with the failure to deliv-

er on promises made, even when there are reasons for this failure, because they are negatively affected (Address by the late Minister of COGTA, Pretoria, 04 March 2010).

In response to major service delivery protests in South Africa, the late Minister of COGTA, Mr. Sicelo Shiceka, adopted a differentiated approach rather than the 'one-size-fits-all' approach prevalent in the past to tackle the challenges confronting municipalities. In December 2009, the Cabinet approved a new policy direction for the way government operates, namely, the Local Government Turnaround Strategy (LGTAS). This is a part of an overall intervention mechanism to improve the local government's performance in delivering services to communities across the country. The LGTAS entails the following:

- ♦ Restoring people's confidence in municipalities as the primary delivery organ of the developmental state at local level.
- ♦ Rebuilding and putting the basic requirements in place for functional, accountable, responsive, effective, efficient, and developmental local government (Address by the late Minister of COGTA, Pretoria, 04 March 2010).

The LGTAS is thus a long-term and sustainable citizen-centered intervention that aims to turn the tide by addressing backlogs and complaints from citizens, which the government agrees are, in the main, valid (Address by the late Minister of COGTA, Pretoria, 04 March 2010).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Limpopo Province was selected as a case study. Municipalities in this province were randomly sampled in order to solicit information that could be generalized to the majority of municipalities in the South African local government sector. A qualitative method was followed due to the small sample population (Bryman and Bell 2007: 38). Both primary and secondary sources can be used to collect information on a situation, phenomenon, issue or group of people (Kumar 1996: 125). Interviews, observation and questionnaires are the three main methods to collect primary data, while secondary sources include information that is already available, such as government publications, reports and previous research. Collecting information from a sam-

ple of the population is often more practical than attempting to obtain information from an entire universe or population (Struwig and Stead 2001: 15). The size of the population and error margin the researcher is willing to tolerate determine the size of the sample. For the purpose of this study, interviews were conducted with municipal officials, questionnaires were administered to councilors and municipal, provincial and national government reports as well as documents and newsletters were analyzed. The researcher also conducted observations of individual participants. The study sought to identify the causes of service delivery challenges within the local government sector in South Africa as well as the effects of such challenges in order to make recommendations to address the identified challenges (Mouton 2012: 53-54).

Population and Sampling

Service delivery challenges affect communities in all nine provinces in South Africa and all 283 municipalities. Limpopo Province is made up of five District and 25 Local Municipalities. For the purpose of this study, the Capricorn District Municipality and its five local municipalities were used as a case study, the results of which could be replicated for the Limpopo Province and generalized to the South African local government environment. The population size was estimated at approximately 200 officials and councilors and the sample was 120. A convenient sample was selected purely on the basis of availability and that the respondents were accessible and articulate. Although municipalities in South Africa and Limpopo Province are not homogeneous, the findings from one district and its local municipalities could be generalized to municipalities in both the province and other rural provinces similar to Limpopo, due to the fact that the legislative and operational frameworks are the same for all similar municipalities. The following three key stakeholders were identified within Capricorn District Municipality, its local municipalities and the provincial Government Department supporting municipalities in Limpopo:

- ♦ Department of Cooperative Governance, Human Settlement and Traditional Affairs
- ♦ Municipal officials
- ♦ Councilors

Data Collection Methods

The study employed unstructured interviews and mailed questionnaires to collect data. An interview involves direct personal contact where the participant is asked to answer questions relating to the research problem. Questionnaires were used to pose questions without direct contact with the respondent.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

It is clear that service delivery to local communities in South Africa is of utmost importance to maintain economic and social stability (City of Polokwane 2014; South Africa: The Presidency 2014). The findings also substantiate the importance of effective service delivery to local communities (Banking Association of South Africa 2014; The Department of Trade and Industry 2015). The key thematic areas below correlate with the literature review. Seventy-one of the 120 questionnaires distributed were completed resulting in a response rate of fifty-nine percent.

Provision of Basic Services

Two critical obstacles that hinder accelerated provision of basic services are the lack of critical infrastructure in rural areas and the proliferation of informal settlements in urban areas. Municipalities do not have either the institutional or fiscal powers to resolve these problems on their own. Inadequate provision of water, roads and electricity was high on the list of local communities' complaints. To resolve this problem, bulk service infrastructure should be provided via a Bulk Infrastructure Holding Fund. This would align Provincial Infrastructure Grants, Municipal Infrastructure Grants and grants for housing projects and the upgrade and rehabilitation of bulk infrastructure (such as Waste Water Treatment Works).

Good Governance and Public Participation

Governance and public participation were key themes that emerged from the study. These can be characterized as lack of political leadership, political interventions and patronage. There is also a lack of policy coherence, multiple reporting demands and a weakening of institutional and organizational abilities in many municipali-

ties. Functional overreach, complex management structures and poor leadership are forcing many municipalities into crisis management. There is also a lack of community involvement. Furthermore, political instability, corruption and undue interference in administrative processes, exacerbate service delivery problems.

Capacity Building

The study found that, while municipalities have limited capacity to deliver basic services, the province also lacks capacity to monitor and support local government. The provincial department responsible for local government has a small financial budget and limited managerial competence. Municipalities find the reporting systems they have to adhere to elaborate and burdensome. There is no standardized data collection and vetting procedure. This results in duplication and large discrepancies between data relating to different municipalities. It is evident that there is a high degree of inappropriate appointments at municipal level. Skills development programs are insufficient and institutional management is not efficient. Four of the five local municipalities in Capricorn District are situated in remote rural areas. This adds to the challenge of securing the required skills. Thus, these municipalities generally lack the financial and human resources required to deliver on their constitutional and legal mandate and citizens' expectations.

Financial Management

Poor administrative and financial management and a lack of controls and accountability were identified as key elements that negatively impact service delivery to communities. Compliance with current financial management specifications seems to be an ongoing challenge for municipalities. Audit reports are uniformly poor for more than half of the municipalities in Capricorn District. This originates with their inability to manage their annual financial statements correctly and to comply with the systems and processes prescribed by the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA). Internal administrative and budgeting systems are cumbersome challenges relating to debt collection and an increase in aged debts that is debt outstanding for more than 90 days, as well as high levels of

non-payment also negatively impact municipalities. There is a structural imbalance between local revenue resources and the expenditure functions assigned to municipalities. Not all municipalities have the same capacity to raise revenue. Poverty levels are higher in rural areas.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to analyze the primary causes of services delivery challenges within municipalities in Limpopo Province, to identify the impact of poor service delivery in these municipalities and to make recommendations to address the challenges. The recommendations will hopefully assist municipalities in Capricorn District, the Limpopo Provincial Government and National Government to improve service delivery to communities at the municipal level. Finally, the study contributes to the body of academic knowledge relating to service delivery to communities at municipal level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Curbing Corruption and Complying with Regulations

Corruption and compliance were at the top of the list of concerns raised by the study respondents. There are widespread perceptions that municipalities do not comply with the law when issuing tenders. This study confirmed these perceptions. It is therefore recommended that the provincial Department of Cooperative Governance, Human Settlement and Traditional Affairs develop mechanisms to help municipalities deal with non-compliance and corruption as well as build communities' confidence in their municipalities.

Intergovernmental Fiscal Relations

A study by COGTA revealed that, although the number of provincial departments and municipalities achieving unqualified audits increased by seventy-five percent in 2013, the financial management challenges confronting provincial and local governments include among others, inadequate skills for planning, budgeting, financial management, expenditure management, credit control, debt management, risk management and internal audits; the poor interface

between financial and non-financial information (in-year monitoring and quality annual reporting); cash flow management; and a lack of systems to manage audit queries and recommendations by both internal and external auditors. Twenty-two percent of the respondents noted the need for intergovernmental fiscal relations between national, provincial and local government to address budget inequalities at municipal level. In the Capricorn District there are serious inequalities in the revenue collected by local municipalities.

Political and Administrative Tensions

The study also revealed that municipal officials find it difficult to divorce party politics from administration. Participants expressed concern at the tension between the political and administrative levels. They noted the need to improve relations between the municipal administration and councilors to ensure the smooth running of municipalities.

Capacity Building

The systems in many municipalities are below standard, and staff vacancy rates in municipalities in Capricorn District jeopardize effective service delivery. The COGTA report also stated that performance agreements are not signed by the due date in most municipalities, as required. Apart from financial challenges, and perhaps due to these challenges, smaller, less capacitated municipalities have problems recruiting and retaining key staff. Although only four percent of the study respondents identified the need to address this challenge, it is a critical element in improving service delivery. Therefore, it is recommended that the appointment and retention of qualified personnel should be high on municipalities' agendas.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Sample Size

The population size was estimated at approximately 200 officials and councilors and a sample of 120 officials and councilors was drawn. Financial capacity and time constraints prevented a broader study that included the whole province of Limpopo or even the whole country.

Comprehensiveness of the Research

Service delivery is an important topic at both the central and local government level. It would therefore have been preferable to ask more questions than the 12 included in the questionnaire. Again, more stakeholders from a larger number of communities across the province could have been included. Time and resources did not allow for this.

Limited Literature

Democracy was ushered in, in South Africa in 1994 and the new Constitution was adopted in 1996. Communities' right to elect their representatives to government and thereby impact service delivery is still a new phenomenon. There is, thus, a paucity of literature on this topic. While the researcher relied on politicians' viewpoints, speeches by the President, and government documents, these were not sufficient to draw high-level conclusions. It was difficult for the researcher to access information from the Department of Cooperative Government, Human Settlement and Traditional Affairs as most of their reports relating to municipal support programs are not posted on their website or even their intranet.

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