



**SENDING A MESSAGE TO THE TOP: THE INFLUENCE OF SERVICE DELIVERY PROTESTS ON
SERVICE DELIVERY PLANNING IN SOUTH AFRICAN MUNICIPALITIES****John Mamokhere***University of Limpopo, Research Administration and Development, Turfloop Campus, Polokwane, South Africa**E-mail: johnmamokhere@gmail.com**Received 23 February 2023; accepted 20 May 2023; published 30 June 2023*

Abstract. South Africa has seen a surge in service delivery protests in recent years. These protests are often due to the inadequate provision of services. Unemployment, poor housing, water and sanitation, electricity, corruption and municipal administration, health, and crime have all been cited as causes of the protests, which have been termed a "poor's rebellion". Given the service dissatisfaction, residents often use protest as a means of communication to influence policy and decision-making. However, this study sought to assess the influence of service delivery protests on service delivery planning using Bolobedu South under the jurisdiction of Greater Tzaneen Municipality. The study utilised a qualitative research approach to collect and analyse the primary results. The citizens residing at Greater Tzaneen Municipality have been interviewed using a face-to-face semi-structured interview guide and the data was analysed using thematic content analysis. The finding of this study shows that service delivery protests are a common phenomenon in South Africa, with citizens protesting over the inadequate delivery of basic services such as shelter, electricity, water and sanitation. Service delivery protests are legally recognised in South Africa. However, as much as they are legally recognized, they are often disruptive and undermine the maturity of democracy. The study recommends that it is essential to engage with the community regularly and ensure that they are aware of the municipality's plans and progress. This engagement should be ongoing and not just when protests erupt. When people feel that they are being heard and that their concerns are being addressed, they are less likely to resort to protests. It also recommends improved communication and engagement between the municipality and the communities they serve. This can involve regular meetings, consultations, and feedback mechanisms that allow community members to express their concerns and provide input on service delivery planning (IDP).

Keywords: service delivery; protests; disruptive; inadequate; planning; South Africa

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1. Introduction

Since the democratic election in 1994, South Africa has experienced surge of both non-violent and violent protests in rural and urban areas. The phenomenon of service delivery protests has become a norm in South Africa (Wasserman, Chuma & Bosch, 2018; Ndasana, Vallabh & Mxunyelwa, 2022). However, In South Africa, protesting is legally recognised in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, which is the supreme law of the country. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, recognise protesting as a human right

and the right to expression. According to a report by the Public Affairs Research Institute, service delivery protests in South Africa have increased significantly since the early 2000s, with over 2000 protests recorded in 2018 alone (PARI, 2019). These protests often arise due to a lack of basic services and are particularly prevalent in poor and marginalized communities (Akinboade, Mokwena & Kinfack, 2013). Furthermore, a study by Abers, Keck & Smithey (2016) on service delivery protests with a focus on Brazil, India, South Africa, and Mexico found that these protests can influence policy and service delivery planning by drawing attention to specific issues and putting pressure on government officials to act. On the other hand, Akinboade Mokwena & Kinfack (2014) indicate that service delivery protests can influence service delivery planning by forcing policymakers to prioritize the provision of basic services. Mirafat (2004) indicate that service delivery protests can create a sense of urgency among government officials and prompt them to commit resources and formulate plans to address the underlying challenges. This can lead to changes in policy, funding allocations, and the deployment of resources to areas that are most in need of services.

Moreover, Ndou (2019), states that service delivery protests can foster greater community participation in service delivery planning. While Pithouse & Naidoo (2015) concur, that protests can create opportunities for citizens to engage in dialogue with local government officials and co-create solutions to service delivery challenges. This can help to ensure that service delivery planning is more responsive to the needs and priorities of the communities being served. The trend of Service delivery protests in South African provinces and municipalities is rising. Municipal IQ (2023) which is the hotspot monitor revealed that the total number of protests for 2022 was 193 in number. It is clear now that the number of protests for 2022 is rising, although significantly higher than in 2020 and 2021, and has not matched the record protest levels of 2018 and 2019. Municipal IQ (2023) further indicate that Gauteng with 27% of all protests in the country is the most prominent site of service delivery protests for 2022, as it has been historically. It is followed by KZN with 22% of protests and the Eastern Cape with 16%. Gauteng remains the most protest-aggravated province, although KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape also have high numbers of protests. With regards to the above, the research question to be answered in this study is what is the influence of these service delivery protests in the formulation and implementation of service delivery planning? The study outlines the problem state, the objective of the study guided by the abovementioned research question and research methodology, the literature review and the conclusion.

2. Problem statement

According to Reddy (2016:7) and Masibigiri (2022:18) stressed that “to date, several government initiatives have been introduced to address service delivery challenges and the dysfunctionality of municipalities, but none have led to any significant improvement in the local governance emergency”. Mamokhere (2020) indicates that this has been witnessed through mass media in a form of protests where societies are expressing their frustration and attempting to influence policy-and-decision-making. Furthermore, Mamokhere (2020) and Masiya, Davids & Mangai (2021) indicates that the influence and factors for the protests have also changed over time, with issues related to housing, water, and sanitation being the most prevalent in the early 2000s. In recent years, protests have shifted to more systemic issues, such as corruption, maladministration, and political interference in service delivery. Xolani et al. (2022), concur that the causes of the protests are diverse and complex, as outlined in previous research, and include socio-economic inequality, corruption, and poor service delivery. These challenges are deeply rooted and require sustained efforts to address them. Burger (2009); Shaidi (2013) and Ngcamu (2019) imply that service delivery protests have become a common manifestation in South Africa, with citizens expressing their dissatisfaction with the poor quality of basic services such as water, sanitation, and electricity (Burchardt, 2022). The research gap in this study is that many studies in South Africa and across the world investigate the causes or underlying factors towards service delivery protests and service delivery challenges. Only few scholars had made contribution on the investigation of the influence of service delivery protests. It is clear that South African municipalities across all the province has witnessed the prevalent service delivery protests due to poor service delivery. This have led to many analyses presenting general theories about the causes

(Masiya, Davids & Mangai, 2021). While these theories shed light on the phenomena, they may not capture the influence of the protests. These protests not only disrupt daily activities but also impact service delivery planning in municipalities. Having assessed the underlying factors towards service delivery protests in South African municipalities, it is now significant to evaluate the influence of such protests if they yield the desired goals. Therefore, there is a need to assess the influence of service delivery protests on service delivery planning in South African municipalities.

Theoretical and Empirical Objective of the Study

This study aims to theoretically and empirically assess the influence of service delivery protests on service delivery planning in South African municipalities.

3. Literature Review

Service delivery protests influence service delivery planning in South Africa

There are many ways in which service delivery protests influence service delivery planning in South African municipalities' perspective. Hereunder are some of the ways in which this has been the case;

Identify and Highlight service delivery gaps

Service delivery protests in South Africa often arise due to a lack of basic services such as water, sanitation, electricity, healthcare, education, and housing, among others. These protests can draw attention to specific areas where service delivery is inadequate and help to identify gaps in the provision of services (Morudu, 2017; Burchardt, 2022). Machiri & Pade-Khene (2020); Burchardt (2022) concur that service delivery protests are a common form of public demonstration in South Africa. These protests typically occur in response to perceived failures or gaps in the delivery of basic public services such as water, electricity, housing, and healthcare. Service delivery protests can be seen as a way for citizens to express their dissatisfaction with the government's performance in delivering these basic services. They often arise when citizens feel that their needs are not being met and that their voices are not being heard by those in power (Akinboade Mokwena & Kinfack, 2014; Mamokhere, 2020; Kalonda & Govender, 2021). However, Shaidi (2013) and Wasserman, Chuma, & Bosch (2018) indicated that the service delivery protests can also be seen as an important mechanism for highlighting service delivery gaps in South Africa. By drawing attention to these issues, protesters can put pressure on the government to take action to improve service delivery in affected areas. They can also raise awareness among the wider public and the media about the challenges faced by communities that lack access to basic services. In this way, Wasserman et al. (2018) posit that the service delivery protests can serve as a catalyst for change and can ultimately lead to improvements in service delivery and better outcomes for citizens. However, the researcher of this article argues that it is important that these protests are conducted peacefully and lawfully, and that all parties involved engage in constructive dialogue to address the underlying issues.

Pressurize government officials to act

These protests usually occur in response to dissatisfaction or grievances related to basic services (Mamokhere, 2020). Service delivery protests in South Africa can create pressure on government officials to respond to community demands for improved service delivery. Protests can draw media attention and generate public outcry, which can compel officials to take action to address the issues (Morudu, 2017; Ngcamu, 2019). Allan & Heese (2011) and Chiwarawara (2021) concur with the above scholars that indeed service delivery protests can certainly put pressure on government officials to act, as they are often seen as a sign of public dissatisfaction with government services and policies. These protests can lead to increased media attention, which can further highlight the issues at hand and create public pressure for action. In some cases, Chiwarawara (2014) and Chiwarawara (2021) indicate that the service delivery protests have been successful in achieving their objectives. For example, protests in Khayelitsha in 2013 resulted in the allocation of additional funding for housing and basic

services. However, in other cases, protests have been met with violent domination, and government officials have been slow to respond to the demands of protesters.

Increase public awareness and participation

Masiya, Davids & Mangai (2019) imply that service delivery protests in South African municipalities are typically triggered by frustrations over inadequate or non-existent access to basic services such as water, electricity, and housing. These protests are usually carried out by community members who feel that their needs are not being adequately addressed by the local government. While these protests can disrupt normal life and cause property damage, they also have the potential to increase public awareness of the challenges faced by communities in accessing basic services (Breakfast, Bradshaw & Nomarwayi, 2019; Mazele & Amoah, 2022). When these protests occur, media coverage is often extensive, and the grievances of the protesters are widely reported (Wasserman et al., 2018). Increased public awareness can lead to greater participation in service delivery planning processes. When citizens become more engaged in advocating for their needs and priorities, they can provide valuable input into the planning and implementation of services. This can help to ensure that services are better targeted towards the needs of communities and that resources are used more effectively (Curristine, Lonti & Joumard, 2007).

In addition to encouraging greater participation in service delivery planning processes, service delivery protests can also put pressure on the government to take action to address the underlying issues. When protests are sustained and widespread, they can become a significant political issue, forcing policymakers to take notice and act (Mamokhere & Meyer, 2022). Hussey (2023) indicates that "community participation helps governments improve the efficiency, legitimacy and transparency of their decision making. By embracing and encouraging participation, it enables policymakers to make more informed decisions by engaging with, and carefully mapping out the needs, opinions and visions of local communities on issues that matter to them. It promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants – including decision-makers. This increases acceptance of decisions and community commitment to outcomes as local knowledge from diverse groups shapes and creates inclusive, effective solutions and improves service delivery". Lack of community participation has been noted as one of the underlying factors towards service delivery protests in South Africa. Encouraging active public participation, according to Mamokhere & Meyer (2022) can contribute to sustainable delivery and minimize service delivery protests. Public participation is encouraged in many South African legislative frameworks such as the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 and the Municipal Systems Act (32 of 2000). Thus, Modise (2017) argues that "the lack of knowledge about participatory democracy has restricted communication between the public officials and communities. This is demonstrated by individuals expressing their discontent through protests when they feel excluded from the decision-making processes (Brooks, 2017). The idea of participatory democracy is a significant obstacle to democratic South Africa as citizens do not have enough understanding of how local municipalities operate. The protests over service delivery show that participatory democracy is a major challenge in democratic South Africa, and consequently, insufficient public participation results in the underdevelopment of local government" (Modise, 2017; Msenge & Nzewi, 2021). From the discussion, it is clear that having active public awareness and participation can influence service delivery.

Overall, while service delivery protests can be disruptive and damaging, however, they can also serve as a powerful tool for citizens to advocate for their needs and priorities, and to ensure that their voices are heard in service delivery planning processes. This was witnessed during the #fessmustfall protest in 2015.

Inform policy development

Service delivery protests can have a substantial influence on policy development in South African municipalities. These protests often arise due to frustration with the lack of basic services such as water, electricity, and housing. They can be seen as a way for citizens to express their dissatisfaction with the quality-of-service delivery in their

communities (Burger, 2009); Shaidi, 2013; Morudu, 2017; Ngcamu, 2019; Mamokhere, 2020). In response to the protests, Matebesi & Botes (2017) indicate that municipalities are often forced to act and address the concerns of their citizens. This can include developing new policies and programs to improve service delivery, as well as increasing transparency and accountability in their operations. Nleya (2011) and Gamede (2021) indicate that protests can also bring attention to specific issues and highlight areas where policies and programs need to be improved. This can provide valuable feedback to policymakers, who can use this information to make more informed decisions and allocate resources more effectively. Furthermore, Shaidi (2013) and Chiwarawara (2021) posit that service delivery protests can also serve as a reminder to government officials that they are accountable to the citizens they serve. By highlighting the failures of service delivery, protests can increase pressure on officials to act and improve the quality of services provided. Mamokhere & Meyer (2022) indicate that service delivery protests in South Africa can inform the review of the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) by highlighting specific service delivery challenges and identifying areas where policy interventions are needed. For example, protests over water shortages can inform policy development around water management and infrastructure investment. In this manner, the researcher of this study argues that a service delivery protest is a powerful tool for influencing policy development in South African municipalities. Service delivery protests can influence the municipality to review the IDP and reprioritise community needs.

Resource allocation

Service delivery protests in South African municipalities can have a significant influence on resource allocation decisions (Gumede, 2014). Protests typically arise when residents feel that the local government is failing to provide basic services such as electricity, water, and sanitation (Allan et al., 2011; Morudu, 2017; Owusu, 2020), and can range from peaceful demonstrations to violent unrest (Mngxitama, 2016). The protests can have both short-term and long-term effects on resource allocation (Matshiqi, 2018). In the short term, protests can lead to increased funding being allocated to the affected municipalities to address the immediate concerns of the protesters (Maphunye, 2014). However, this increased spending may not be sustainable in the long term, as it may divert resources away from other areas of need in the municipality (Van der Veen, 2016). In the long term, service delivery protests can also influence resource allocation decisions by shaping policy priorities and budgets (Seekings, 2017). Municipalities may be forced to reassess their spending priorities and redirect resources towards addressing the underlying causes of the protests, such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality (Makgetla, 2018). For instance, this may involve investing in education, job creation programs, and social welfare services, which can have a more sustainable impact on improving living conditions and reducing the likelihood of future protests.

It is important to note that the influence of service delivery protests on resource allocation decisions can vary depending on a range of factors, including the severity and duration of the protests, the level of public pressure, and the responsiveness of the government. Ultimately, effective resource allocation requires a holistic understanding of the needs and priorities of the community, and a commitment to addressing these needs through sustainable and equitable policies and programs (Burger, 2009; Nleya, 2011). Service delivery protests in South African municipalities can indeed drive resource allocation to areas where services are most urgently needed as discussed above. For example, protests over the lack of housing can lead to increased investment in affordable housing initiatives in affected communities. The next section presents the research methodology adopted to achieve the aim of this article.

4. Research Methodology and Materials

The qualitative research method was used in this study. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003), the qualitative method investigates things in their natural environments and tries to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings individuals assign to them. Because the research involves analyzing human behaviour in a unique situation, the qualitative research design was most appropriate. Because the chosen subject area is under-

researched in South Africa, an exploratory design was adopted. According to Bless, Higson-Smith, and Sithole (2013), exploratory designs are predominantly qualitative and frequently employ small, non-probability samples. This design assisted the researcher in investigating the influence of service delivery protests on service delivery planning, using Bolobedu South under Greater Tzaneen Municipality as a case study. In other words, the study has been empirically conducted at Bolobedu South in Greater Tzaneen Municipality, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The target population in this study was community members, and twenty (20) were used as a sample frame. They were sampled using the purposive sampling technique, which is understood as a process "where the researcher relies on his expert judgment to select units that are representative of the population," according to Burger & Silima (2006:663). Data collection in this study involved both primary and secondary data. In collecting secondary data, which is existing literature, the researcher has reviewed the literature using the study themes to search for and identify new themes. Different databases, such as Google, Google Scholar, Scopus, and university repositories, were used. On the other hand, primary data was collected using a semi-structured interview guide. Twenty (20) interviews were scheduled in 2020 as part of honours study and conducted with community members to share their experience with service delivery protests and their impact on them thereafter. From the participants interviewed, no demographic information was collected because they had no direct impact in the results of this study and South Africa's Protection of Personal Information Act of 2021 (*POPIA*) also discourage collection of such information. The data collected was analyzed using thematic content analysis. According to O'Leary (2014:300), "Thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. It minimally organizes and describes the data set in detail. The benefit of utilizing thematic content analysis in this study is its ability and potential to further interpret and highlight emerging themes and aspects of service delivery protests". Lastly, to ensure the reliability and validity of the study, the researcher was not biased toward the topic under investigation, and the interview questions were tested against the study objective to ensure that the language used in the questions was appropriate and specific to the topic under investigation. The next section presents the empirical results and discussion.

5. Results and Discussion

To realise the objectives of this article, the themes were created from the data analysis process. The results are presented based on the study objective and the questions asked. The major themes identified are (i) experience with service delivery protests in the municipality; (ii) common issues that lead to service delivery protests in your municipality; and (iii) service delivery protests influence service delivery planning in the municipality. The results are presented below in a thematic format.

Experience with service delivery protests and Common Issues that lead to service delivery protests in the municipality

The researcher asked community members of Bolobedu South under the jurisdiction of Greater Tzaneen Municipality these questions: what is your experience with service delivery protests in your municipality and what are the most common issues that lead to service delivery protests in your municipality? The majority of the respondents indicated that *"They have personally been involved in several protests due to poor service delivery from the municipality. In recent years, many people in different communities were unhappy with the basic services they receive from their Greater Tzaneen Municipality, they then organize service delivery protests at the municipality offices. The protests are usually sparked by problems like not having enough clean water, electricity, housing, or sanitation services. Other respondents indicated that protests also happen when people are frustrated with things like high unemployment, corruption, or political issues"*.

While other respondents further indicated that even though they have never been personally involved in the actual protests themselves. They responded by stating that *"The occurrence of service delivery protests is not uncommon in municipalities across South Africa. In recent years, there have been several service delivery protests in Greater*

Tzaneen Municipality and other municipalities in the country. These protests can sometimes lead to disruptions in daily life, damage to public property, and clashes between protestors and Police officials”.

In this regard, municipalities need to take service delivery seriously and address the concerns of residents in a timely and effective manner to prevent service delivery protests from occurring. The finding above concurs with the finding from many studies that indicate that service delivery protests are often triggered by poor service delivery as stated in the study by Xolani et al. (2022). While Atkinson (2007); Managa (2012) and Masiya, Davids & Mangai (2021) argue that poor governance, lack of accountability and lack of participatory democracy, lack of institutional capacity, misuse of municipalities resources, unfulfilled promises by politicians, and poor administration of housing allocation are among the common issues of service delivery protests. On the other hand, Wasserman et al., (2018:1), directly concurred that “over the past few years, there has been a rise in service delivery protests in South Africa. These protests are a response to the insufficient provision of services, and they stem from the high levels of economic inequality that have left citizens feeling increasingly frustrated. Reasons cited for the protests include unemployment, housing, water and sanitation, electricity, corruption, municipal administration, health, and crime. The protests are often referred to as a 'rebellion of the poor,' and they serve as a means of communication for citizens who are dissatisfied with the status quo”.

Service delivery protests influence service delivery planning in the municipality

The question asked in this section was: Do service delivery protests influence service delivery planning in your municipality? In response to this question, the respondent indicated: *“Yes, we have been involved in many service delivery protests as a form of communication to the municipality. This has been the only mechanism that the municipality pays more attention to even though it is often characterised by many disruptive activities like damaging roads and other municipal infrastructure. Therefore, in my personal experience, this work best than other mechanisms because the municipality takes time to resolve simple issues but if we protest, the municipality often reprioritises the IDP and municipal budget. Other respondents indicated that in the protest we can hold the government accountable and resort the common decisions going forward”.*

Another respondent personally indicated that *“I can say that service delivery protests can have an impact on service delivery planning in a municipality. When residents protest, they are often drawing attention to specific issues or problems with the delivery of essential services such as water, electricity, housing, or sanitation. This can create pressure on local authorities to act and find solutions to address these issues. In response to these protests, municipal officials may review their service delivery plans and budgets to identify areas where they can allocate more resources or make improvements. They may also engage with community leaders and residents to better understand their needs and concerns, and to develop more effective strategies for delivering essential services”.*

In this regard, the researcher argues that service delivery protests can serve as a powerful tool for communities to advocate for their rights and demand better services. While they can be disruptive and even violent at times, they can also lead to positive changes in service delivery planning and implementation. Shaidi (2013) indicate that service delivery protests present both positive and negative impact. While Managa (2012) indicate that having active public participation can also be beneficial as the communities and municipalities can have common ground on service delivery priorities. “Protesters mostly express dissatisfaction and frustrations for being excluded from local government decision-making” (Managa, 2012). Section 16(1) of the Municipal Systems Act (Act 32 of 2000) “requires a municipality to develop a culture of municipal governance that complements formal representative government with a system of participatory governance. Municipal councils must encourage the involvement of the local community in the decisions that directly affect them”. The researcher of this study argues that the right of public participation in the governance process is a constitutional obligation and is protected by various policy frameworks governing local governments. Community participation is meant to provide information as well as improve public decisions, programmes, and projects among other things. Despite the

availability of mechanisms to promote public participation, “they are not always adequately implemented, and communities may use other channels to make their voices heard” (Jooste, 2012). Therefore, it is clear that having protests as a form of public participation can influence delivery service planning.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, this study has adopted a qualitative research approach to achieve the objective of this study. The objective of this study was to assess the influence of service delivery protests on service delivery planning in South African municipalities. It is found that service delivery protests can have both positive and negative impacts on the planning and delivery of essential services. Service delivery protests have an influence or impact on service delivery planning in South African municipalities, as they can disrupt operations, delay projects, and damage infrastructure. The limitation of this study was based on geographical location. The study was only limited to one specific area under the Greater Tzaneen Municipality, therefore, future studies will address all the areas under the jurisdiction of Greater Tzaneen Municipalities. The future studies will go to an extent to develop effective model to mitigate the protests in South Africa as a whole. However, there are steps that municipalities can take to minimize the negative impact of these protests on service delivery planning. Here are some suggestions:

- The study recommends that it is essential to engage with the community regularly and ensure that they are aware of the municipality's plans and progress. This engagement should be ongoing and not just when protests erupt. When people feel that they are being heard and that their concerns are being addressed, they are less likely to resort to protests. It also recommends improving communication and engagement between the municipality and the communities they serve. This can involve regular meetings, consultations, and feedback mechanisms that allow community members to express their concerns and provide input on service delivery planning (IDP).
- It recommends developing a communication strategy. The municipality should develop a communication strategy to inform the public of its plans and progress. This strategy should include regular updates through social media, radio, newspapers, and community meetings. By doing this, the municipality can keep the public informed, and people will feel less frustrated and less likely to protest.
- It recommends that when grievances are raised, the municipality should address them promptly and transparently. This will help to build trust and prevent grievances from escalating into protests.
- It is important to prioritize service delivery. Municipalities should prioritize service delivery and ensure that they are providing essential services such as water, electricity, and sanitation. If people feel that their basic needs are being met, they are less likely to protest.

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