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SERVICE DELIVERY CONUNDRUMS IN SOUTH AFRICAN MUNICIPALITIES

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Received 11 February 2025; accepted 10 May 2025; published 30 June 2025

Abstract. The South African municipal government is primarily responsible for service delivery. However, millions of citizens still face conundrums in accessing basic utilities such as electricity, water, sanitation, and refuse collection. The apartheid legacy has led to massive backlogs and challenges, but also the policies implemented since 1994 are primarily responsible for the current service delivery conundrums. The study aims to investigate the factors that cause service delivery delays in the South African municipal government. The study adopted a qualitative research methodology to identify and analyze the key factors contributing to service delivery delays. The data was collected from secondary sources and analyzed thematically using thematic content analysis. The study findings indicate that service delivery remains a persistent conundrum in many South African municipalities, often leading to public dissatisfaction and protests. It was further found that bureaucratic inefficiencies, financial constraints and mismanagement, political-administrative interface, systemic corruption, and lack of institutional capacity and resources are significant barriers to effective service delivery. The study recommends a comprehensive approach to enhance service delivery in South African municipalities, focusing on strengthening local government efficiency. One key strategy is capacity building, which involves training municipal staff to plan, implement, and monitor service delivery projects. This training can lead to more effective governance and improved municipal services. The study acknowledges that ethical governance is crucial for improved financial management and service delivery in municipalities. A mindset shift for municipal officials and politicians is needed to focus on service delivery and efficient resource management, ensuring municipalities are run as efficient businesses. Lastly, the study also suggests revising the policy framework, particularly the 1998 White Paper on Local Government, to address systemic challenges and ensure responsive local government.

Keywords: service delivery; service delivery delays; municipal governance; district development model; integrated development plan; municipalities; protests

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Mamokhere, J. 2025. Service delivery conundrums in South African municipalities. *Insights Into Regional Development*, 7(2), 30-42. <https://doi.org/10.70132/b5776454636>

JEL Classifications: H41

1. Introduction

Local governments worldwide play a crucial role in delivering essential services to their communities, contributing to social development, economic growth, and infrastructure maintenance (Matyana & Mthethwa, 2022). In South Africa, municipalities are mandated by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) to provide residents with essential services such as water supply, sanitation, electricity, and waste management. However, despite the democratic government's efforts to address the deep-rooted inequalities of the apartheid era,

challenges in service delivery persist. While historic injustices have contributed to existing backlogs, many contemporary issues arise from administrative inefficiencies, financial mismanagement, and political-administrative interference (McDonald & Pape, 2002; Bester, 2024; Potlaki, 2024; Amusa, 2024).

However, Matyana et al. (2022) argued that one of the key mechanisms implemented to improve municipal governance and service delivery in South Africa is the integrated development plan (IDP). According to the Municipal Systems Act (32 of 2000), every municipality must formulate an IDP to align municipal budgets with community needs and ensure adequate service provision. However, Mamokhere (2022) and Matloga, Mahole, & Nekhavhambe (2024) opine that the success of IDPs meant for effective service delivery is often hindered by poor public participation, governance challenges, and mismanagement. Matyana et al. (2022) highlighted that limited community involvement and political interference in IDPs undermine their intended purpose, leading to ineffective service delivery. Furthermore, Managa (2012) stated that these conundrums are compounded by maladministration, fruitless expenditure, and a lack of transparency and accountability in local governance.

Statistics South Africa (2024) stated that service delivery is a fundamental responsibility of municipalities, ensuring that essential services such as water, sanitation, electricity, and waste management reach communities effectively. StatsSA (2024) also stated that access to basic services has improved between 2011 and 2022. According to Census data, access to clean water has grown from 85.1% to 88.5%, and improved sanitation has been enhanced from 68.9% to 80.7%, highlighting ten years of service delivery progress. However, Ragolane (2022) and Myeni, Matyana, & Mthembu (2024) imply that delays in service delivery have been a recurring issue in South Africa, often leading to community protests. This study reviews existing research to identify and analyze the factors contributing to service delivery delays and proposes potential approaches to enhance service delivery in South African municipalities.

2. Problem Statement

Many pieces of legislation govern the administration of service delivery in South African municipalities. However, the legislative frameworks are often undermined through corrupt practices by politicians and municipal officials, which leads to poor service delivery. Legislative frameworks such as the Constitution of South Africa (1996), the Municipal Systems Act (2000), and the Municipal Structures Act (1998) were established to foster participatory governance and improve service delivery. On the other hand, the legislative frameworks were established to eliminate corruption, yet their full implementation remains a challenge (Matyana et al., 2022). Madumo & Koma (2022) stated that local government faces challenges due to dysfunctional municipalities, poor financial performance, and poor political leadership.

The South African government should revisit constitutional powers granted to local government and introduce a pragmatic model for running municipal affairs, as they face systemic issues related to fulfilling their constitutional obligations. Furthermore, Madumo & Koma (2019) indicated that to enhance service delivery, municipalities must fully embrace participatory governance as mandated by the South African Constitution (1996), specifically Chapter 7, Section 152. The IDP is a primary mechanism guiding municipal budgets and initiatives; it should be utilized effectively to ensure efficient service provision, promote local economic growth, and foster community engagement in governance. However, Managa (2012) and Mamokhere (2022) stress that financial mismanagement, wasteful expenditure, and political influence in decision-making undermine service delivery and citizen trust. Thus, addressing these systemic inefficiencies requires a renewed commitment to transparency, accountability, and community-driven development. In terms of the White Paper on Local Government (1998), municipal services ought to be:

- Accessible and communities should have access to at least a minimum level of services as a constitutional obligation;
- Convenient and easy to use;
- As affordable as possible; and
- Of a predetermined standard, meaning that services should be suitable for their purpose and be on time; and
- Be safe and be available continuously.

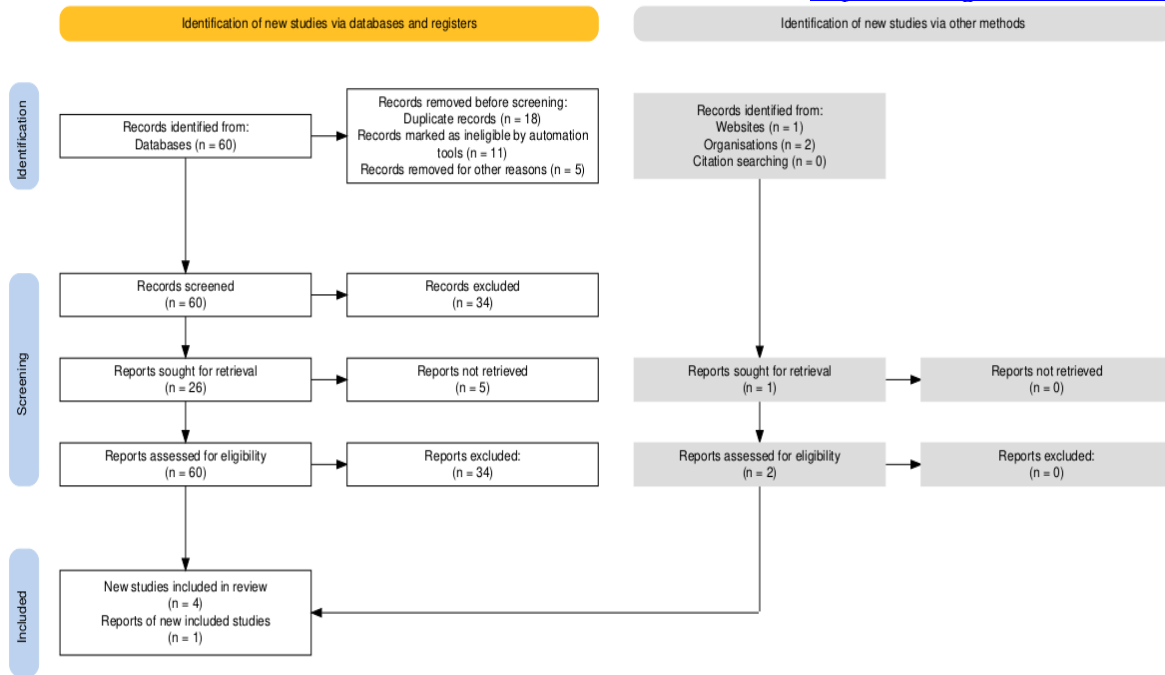
Given these mandates by the White Paper (1998), South African local government still faces systemic challenges in fulfilling its constitutional obligations, including delayed service delivery (Madumo et al., 2019; Mamokhere, 2022). StatsSA (2024) outlined that President Cyril Ramaphosa initiated the District Development Model (DDM) in 2019 to address these issues, highlighting the lack of coherence in planning and implementation. To address poverty, inequality, and employment, Ramaphosa called for a new integrated district-based approach that localizes procurement and job creation, promotes local businesses, and involves communities. This approach addresses poor service delivery, poverty, inequality, and employment while promoting local businesses and community involvement (StatsSA, 2024).

This study aims to critically examine the contemporary factors contributing to municipal service delivery conundrums in South Africa, focusing on how governance failures impact essential services such as water supply, sanitation, electricity, and waste removal.

3. Research Methods and Materials

This study utilized qualitative research methodology through a scoping review. Peters et al. (2021) indicated that a scoping review is a systematic method of evidence synthesis that maps existing literature on a broad topic or field, providing an overview of available research, identifying key concepts, and highlighting knowledge gaps. It is an exploratory approach that focuses on identifying evidence types, clarifying key concepts, and understanding research conducted within a field.

The systematic process includes defining the research question, searching for relevant literature, selecting studies, and synthesizing findings. Data charts are often used instead of statistical synthesis, creating a descriptive summary of the evidence. Scoping reviews offer greater flexibility regarding evidence types, including primary research, reviews, policy documents, and other types of information. Page et al. (2020) indicated that the PRISMA extension for scoping reviews was published in 2018. Figure 1 below presents the PRISMA-ScR adopted in this study.

**Figure 1.** PRISMA-ScR

Source: Own Compilation using Shinyapps.io Software. https://estech.shinyapps.io/prisma_flowdiagram

Preparation and Database Search

In this study, the preparation begins by reading government reports and news to understand the extent of service delivery delay. As part of the preparation, the researcher then hypothetically assumed factors that cause service delivery delays. The topic of the study was inspired by the ongoing protests triggered by poor service delivery in South African municipalities. The research then started with a search for relevant studies. The keyword search initially produced 60 research outputs from the 5 different databases. In the database search, the researcher only considered each database's first ten (N=10) research outputs. Google, Google Scholar, DOAJ, and IBSS indices were used to search for relevant information. The data collection process was guided by these specific keywords, including "service delivery delay," "municipal governance," and "South African municipalities." These keywords facilitated comprehensive searches of relevant literature across various databases. The research outputs include journal articles, book chapters, government reports and internet sources. After screening the research studies, reports and internet sources, the author was left with twenty-six (N=26) sources eligible for citations in this study. The duplications and other irrelevant studies totalling thirty-four (N=34) were removed from the study. Table 1 below presents the inclusion and exclusion criteria followed in this scoping review.

Establishing the Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria and Selection of Relevant Studies

In this study, the author intentionally reviewed 60 studies, including journal articles, book chapters, government reports, and internet sources, to determine whether the inclusion and exclusion criteria were satisfied. Table 1 below presents the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Year of Publication	Studies and reports published from 2012 to 2025	Studies and reports published before 2011.
Quantity	The study retrieved 60 research outputs, of which 26 were cited.	Out of the 60 studies, 34 were excluded due to ineligibility.
Type of research outputs	Peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, government reports, and internet sources on service delivery conundrums in South Africa were considered.	Non-peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceeding papers, commentaries, book reviews, published theses, dissertations, and editorial documents were excluded.
Document language	Documents written in English	Documents not published in English.
Study area	The study only considered articles, reports, and internet sources focused on South Africa.	Studies focusing on countries other than South Africa were excluded.
Relevance of studies	The first 60 studies on service delivery conundrums in South Africa were identified. The relevance was identified through abstracts for journal articles, while the reports and internet sources were read fully.	The research studies are not relevant to the topic being studied.

Source: Own compilation

Data Analysis Process

This study's data analysis followed a scoping review model, systematically mapping key concepts and findings. First, data was collected from academic databases, government reports, and internet sources. Second, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to filter relevant studies. Third, thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns in service delivery challenges. Fourth, data was charted into governance, financial management, and infrastructure categories. The findings of this study are further discussed in the results and discussion section.

4. Results**The Conceptualization, Contextualization and Status Quo of Service Delivery**

StatsSA (2024) indicated that service delivery involves providing crucial public services, including clean water, waste management, healthcare, education, and infrastructure development. Reliable access to safe water and sanitation is fundamental to human life, well-being, and dignity, serving as a cornerstone of an improved quality of life. Delivering these services plays a vital role in reducing poverty and inequality. As the primary driver of basic service provision, local government ensures access to essential services and fosters development by directing economic resources to enhance citizens' lives. While municipalities often manage service delivery directly, they also collaborate with community organizations or private entities through contracts or privatization. Despite significant advancements in service provision over recent decades, access remains uneven across and

within municipalities due to variations in population size, economic development levels, and infrastructure demands (StatsSA, 2024). The study by Ragolane & Malatji (2024) highlighted that the City of Johannesburg, between 2012 and 2019, faced concerns about insufficient water availability, high costs, and poor sanitation services. The City of Johannesburg has improved basic services like water tanks and chemical toilets, but around 133,540 households still lack electricity. Challenges such as illegal connections, cable theft, and vandalism require constant maintenance and upgrading. Waste management faces financial constraints, leading to illegal dumping in rural and informal settlement areas. The housing crisis has led to informal settlements, overcrowded hostels, and homelessness. Poor road conditions require rehabilitation, and housing is a significant problem, with long waiting periods and poor-quality designs (Ragolane & Malatji, 2024). The study further explores the state of access to basic service delivery using census data between 2011 and 2022.

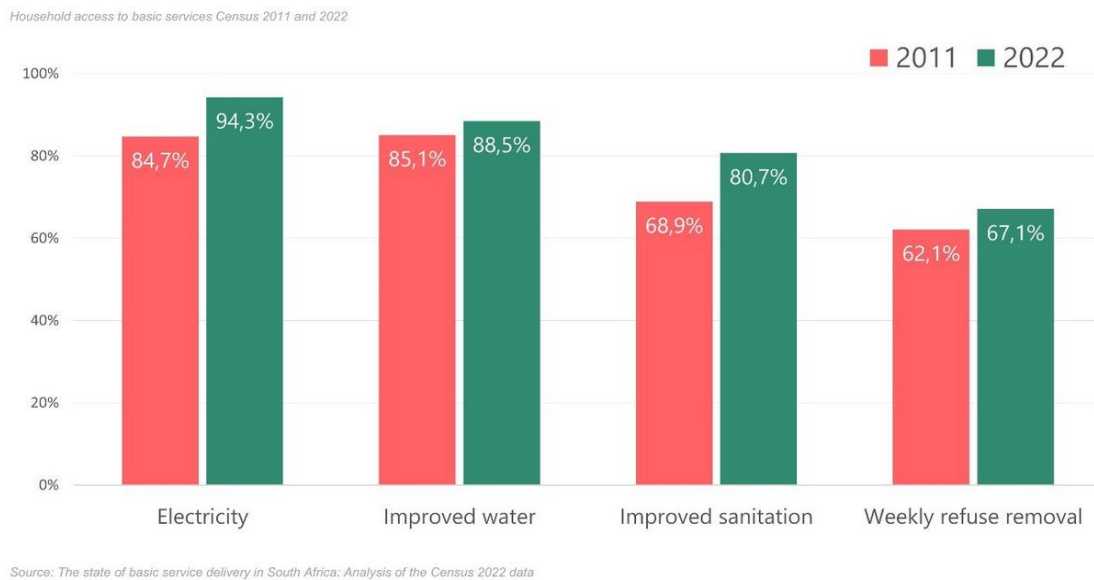


Figure 2. Household access to basic services, census 2011 and 2022

As illustrated in Figure 2, a scale from 0 to 5 measures service availability, where 0 indicates no services, and 5 represents full provision. Between 2011 and 2022, access to essential services improved significantly. Census data shows that access to clean water rose from 85.1% to 88.5%, while improved sanitation increased from 68.9% to 80.7%, highlighting a decade of progress in service delivery. The report *The State of Basic Service Delivery in South Africa: Analysis of the Census 2022 Data*, published by Statistics South Africa, further indicates that weekly refuse removal grew by five percentage points to 67.1% in 2022, while access to electricity increased by 9.6 percentage points to 94.3%. Despite the significant strides made since 1994 in enhancing the quality of life for South Africans by expanding basic services, particularly in rural and informal settlements, the remaining service backlogs pose the most significant challenges.

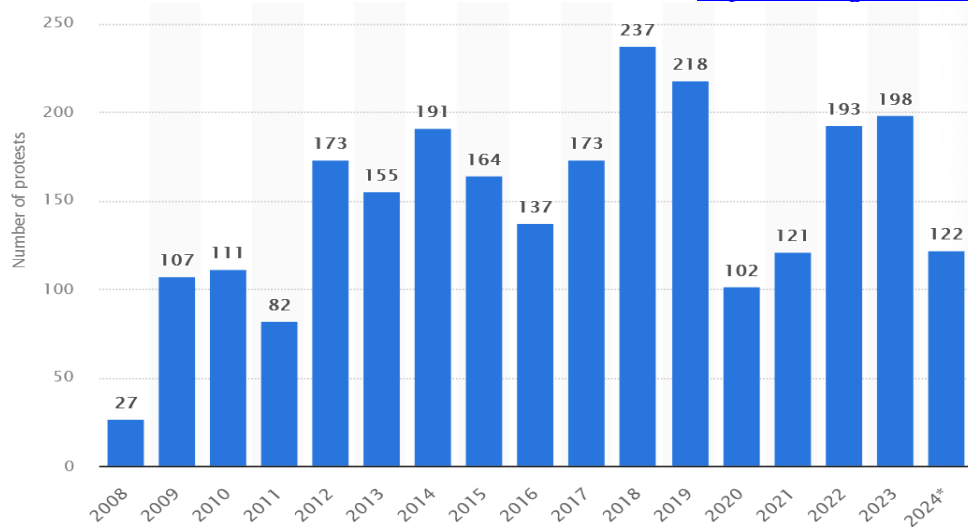


Figure 3. Number of service delivery protests in South Africa from 2008 to 2024

Source: Statista (2025)

The inadequate service delivery has amplified violent protests across the country (Matyana et al., 2022; Yende, 2025). In 2024, South Africa experienced 122 service delivery protests, reflecting ongoing challenges in municipal service provision. Historically, the number of such protests has fluctuated, peaking at 237 in 2018, mainly due to political events like the controversial cabinet reshuffle by then-president Jacob Zuma (Statista, 2025). By June 2024, 38% of these protests were attributed to electricity or water issues, marking an increase from 24% in the previous month.

While rolling blackouts ceased as of March 2024, water supply problems persisted due to poor infrastructure and corruption (Statista, 2025). Mamokhere & Kgobe (2023) indicated that this surge underlines persistent issues in basic service delivery, particularly concerning electricity and water services. Similarly, Xolani, Mkhize & Mlambo (2022) stated that the consistent occurrence of these protests highlights enduring deficiencies in municipal service delivery in South Africa, emphasizing the need for substantial improvements in infrastructure and governance to address citizens' concerns effectively. Yende (2025) states that South Africa's violent protests are a response to service delivery failures like inadequate housing, sanitation, and clean water.

These protests cause devastation, injuries, and loss of life, eroding trust between communities and authorities. The government's inability to address these disparities triggers a cycle of unrest, disrupting stability and hindering development in the country.



Figure 4. Evidence of prevalent service delivery protests in South Africa

Source: Own Compilation

In terms of Figure 3, it is evident that service delivery in South Africa is a critical issue, with unreliable government services causing inconvenience and endangerment. As a result, protests demanding better service delivery have increased, dominating local politics and often leading to violence. The term "service delivery protest" has become a media catch-all.

Factors Contributing to Service Delivery Delays

The study of Matyana & Sibiyi (2025) implies that South Africa's local governments face numerous challenges in service delivery, including bureaucratic inefficiencies, insufficient resources, and systemic corruption, which hinder their ability to provide essential services to communities. The section examines the factors leading to service delivery delays within South African municipalities. The main factors are summarized in Table 2 below and discussed in further detail:

Table 2. A summary of factors contributing to service delivery delays

Factors	Applied Research Methodology	Type of Document (e.g., Journal)	Sources
Bureaucratic inefficiencies and other ineffectiveness, e.g., poor planning, lack of skilled personnel, and bureaucratic red tape.	Qualitative (desktop studies)	Journal articles	Mamokhere, 2024; Ragolane et al., 2024; Matyana et al., 2025
Financial constraints, e.g., mismanagement of public funds and low revenue collection	Qualitative and PRISMA Model	Journal articles	Mishi et al., 2012; Chauke et al., 2024.
Political-administrative interface, e.g., Patronage networks influencing resource allocation.	Qualitative and Semi-structured interviews	Master's dissertation and Government Report	Mathonsi, 2025; AGSA, 2021
Lack of institutional capacity and resources. E.g., Aging and inadequate infrastructure, management and staff capacity.	Qualitative and Semi-structured interviews, desktop study	Journal articles	Khambule & Mtapuri, 2018; Mamokhere, 2024
Lack of community participation	Qualitative and Semi-structured interviews	Journal articles	
Systemic Corruption	Qualitative (desktop studies)	Journal articles	Laubscher, 2012; Matyana & Sibiya 2025

Source: Author's compilation

5. Discussion

In South Africa, service delivery protests are mainly due to administrative inefficiencies in municipal governance. Poor planning and coordination among departments cause delays in project implementation and ineffective responses to community needs. This leads to dissatisfaction with essential services like water supply, waste management, and road maintenance. High staff turnover and bureaucratic red tape also contribute to the issue. Many municipalities struggle to retain qualified professionals due to poor working conditions, inadequate salaries, and political interference (Mamokhere, 2024). This results in inconsistent service delivery and frustration among communities. Protests often arise when citizens feel unheard or when promised developments are delayed (Ragolane et al., 2024). Mishi, Mbaleki, & Mushonga (2022:1) stated that "local governments are considered an essential part of interpreting and integrating laws and policies at the local level. There is a growing realization that the success of local government is vital to alleviating poverty and delivering services to communities. However, financial mismanagement as per audit reports has affected several local authorities and continues to hinder progress". Laubscher (2012) stated that municipalities face financial limitations due to mismanagement of budgets, poor financial planning, low revenue collection, and dependency on national funding. This leads to inefficient allocation of funds, delays, and incomplete projects. Low revenue collection and over-reliance on national funding also weaken financial sustainability. Corruption and irregular expenditure further drain resources, affecting infrastructure development and maintenance, worsening living conditions, and fueling public discontent (Laubscher, 2012; AGSA, 2021; Chauke et al., 2024).

Mathonsi (2025) advocates effectively separating public service from politics to fulfil its developmental mandate. Overly political interference in public service can hinder the state's obligation to provide crucial services to the

people. Depoliticizing public services can contribute to the well-being and advancement of the populace. The data shows that political interference negatively impacts basic service provision in Johannesburg, which is exacerbated by the chopping and changing political leadership due to the coalition government arrangement. Therefore, the state should depoliticize public services to enhance the well-being and advancement of the populace (Mathonsi, 2025). Equally, the Auditor General of South Africa (AGSA) (2021) identifies poor financial management, governance, oversight, and leadership as the main reasons for poor financial performance in municipalities. Political interface in administration strains relations between key officials, causing many municipalities to struggle financially.

Additionally, municipalities often plan for failure, preparing unfunded budgets based on unrealistic revenues and expenditures rather than preparing credible budgets approved by councils. This results in unfunded and unsustainable financial practices (AGSA, 2021). According to Matyana & Mthethwa (2022:1125), “the lack of community participation in local government affairs results in poor service delivery and inconsistencies. Winnie Madikizela Mandela Local Municipality experiences huge service delivery inequalities, which cause harm to its inhabitants because the living conditions are unsuitable. Each municipality in South Africa is mandated to provide equal services to its communities”. Khambule & Mtapuri (2018) and Mamokhere (2024) stated that municipalities often lack the necessary infrastructure, financing, and personnel to effectively plan, implement, and maintain basic services like electricity, water, and sanitation. This lack of strong institutional structures and qualified staff hinders strategic decision-making, project management, and service provision oversight. This lack of capacity and resources leads to inefficiencies, delays, and an inability to meet citizens' needs. Competent and skilled staff within municipalities can also contribute to these issues.

Enhancing Service Delivery in South Africa

The study acknowledges that improving service delivery in South Africa requires many collaborative approaches that strengthen local government efficiency (Thusi et al., 2024). One crucial strategy is capacity building, which focuses on training municipal staff to enhance their ability to plan, implement, and monitor service delivery projects. Well-trained personnel contribute to more effective governance and improve public services (Mamokhere, 2024). The study of Molobela (2025) suggests that South Africa should acquire adequate ICT skills and infrastructure to enhance its public service delivery, as digital technology presents a transformative opportunity to replace traditional manual systems and improve public interaction. Technological integration is also vital, as digital platforms facilitate better citizen engagement, while data analytics enables informed decision-making. Embracing modern technology can streamline processes, enhance transparency, and improve overall service delivery efficiency. Additionally, the White Paper on Local Government (1998) encourages strong partnerships between municipalities, the private sector, non-governmental organisations, and community-based organizations that can help mobilize resources, share expertise, and ensure services align with community needs.

The study also acknowledges a need to revise the policy framework, which is essential for addressing local governance inefficiencies. The proposed revision of the 1998 White Paper on Local Government presents a significant opportunity to rectify systemic challenges that have hindered municipal effectiveness over the past 30 years of democracy. Updating this framework can ensure more responsive local governments that efficiently deliver essential services such as water, sanitation, and electricity. Furthermore, strengthening financial management will enhance fiscal responsibility, transparency, and sustainability, ensuring that municipal budgets are utilized effectively. A renewed focus on community engagement is also critical, involving residents in decision-making through consultations and participatory governance. Municipalities can better address local needs and foster public trust in government institutions (Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, 2025). Lastly, Kikasu & Pillay (2024) indicated that the 2024 elections have sparked a Government of

National Unity (GNU), which aims to improve service delivery at the local level. This government can introduce legal and institutional reforms to combat corruption, simplify bureaucratic processes, and strengthen local government accountability. It can also attract international investment and provide municipalities with additional resources to enhance service delivery. Strategic reforms and collaborative efforts will create more accountable, efficient, and sustainable local governments, ensuring long-term socio-economic development in South Africa.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study found that service delivery delays in South African municipalities are a worrying issue, impacting community well-being and public trust in local governance. Key conundrums include administrative inefficiencies, financial mismanagement, political-administrative interference, and infrastructural limitations. These factors create a complex landscape that requires urgent intervention. To address these challenges, a multifaceted approach is needed. Strengthening capacity-building programs for municipal employees will enhance governance efficiency, while transparent financial management systems will curb corruption and ensure responsible use of public funds. Encouraging public participation in decision-making will foster accountability and align services with community needs. Leveraging technology for tracking and monitoring service delivery can enhance efficiency while establishing robust accountability mechanisms. Implementing these recommendations can significantly improve service delivery, restore public confidence in local governance, and drive sustainable development as required by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996.

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