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CHALLENGES RELATED TO ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC SERVICE

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Abstract. The study examines the challenges that cause a lack of accountability (focus) in South African public service (locus). Personal greed for financial gain, continuously rising professional status, and demand for authoritative powers are all linked to a lack of personal values that create employee expectations. It is considered corrupt behaviour when achieving personal goals, which involves taking shortcuts through contacts, favouritism, nepotism, and bribery. At the same time, allowing these personal gains to be realised through accepting bribes or giving strategic positions to favoured ones is unethical behaviour. In this scenario, both parties—the giver and the receiver—are being unethical. The study substantiates this situation by compiling information through a document review. This document review was a qualitative study whereby official documents were reviewed to highlight corruption and misconduct statistics. The data was assessed using conceptual and document analysis. The findings reveal a lack of accountability in public service, attributed to a lack of political will to combat corruption, political interference, bureaucratic red tape, and inadequate measures to impose penalties, among other factors. More challenges are discussed in the study. The literature review and analysis of documents assisted the author in proposing a framework called the Accountability Framework for Public Service that suggests measures to enhance accountability and combat corruption at the political, policy, and institutional levels. The framework proposed in the study can be considered an inductive contribution to public administration, management, and governance.

Keywords: accountability; corruption; qualitative study; misconduct; public service; South Africa

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JEL Classifications: D73, H83

Additional disciplines: Development Studies, Public Management.

1. Introduction

The supreme abiding document, that is, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), establishes the concepts of accountability and monitoring across all the spheres of government (Munhendzi, 2016:1). The constitutional mandate to provide public services applies to all three government tiers, and each sphere's capacity determines its level of responsibility and public service rendering. Public authorities are under greater scrutiny for demonstrating accountability while using the resources at their disposal. Administrators in the public sector are increasingly relying on internal audits and audit committees to ensure responsibility and prudent financial management (Ngumbela, 2022:2). Accountability requires exposing, explaining, and justifying behaviours (Van der Nest, Thornhill & De Jager, 2008:546). It requires that public organisations make their operations public to foster open conversation and critique (Vyas-Doorgapersad & Ababio, 2006:393). Similarly, Mamokhere (2020) agrees that accountability is essential for a sound government. As a result, accepting responsibility is a requirement of public accountability, as suggested by Kgobe and Mamokhere (2021:3).

ISSN 2669-0195 (online) https://jssidoi.org/ird/
2025 Volume 7 Number 3 (September)
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Despite several legislative frameworks put in place to promote accountability in the public sector, evidence from practice demonstrates that the process of promoting accountability has never been smooth. Accountability, in the context of this study, refers to promoting sound administration in the public sector by eliminating corruption, increasing the efficient functioning of the public service sector, and preventing individuals in positions of power from abusing their authority. According to Pedersen and Nielson (2016:361), holding government officials accountable for their actions enables punishing those who engage in unlawful conduct and discourages others from engaging in illicit activities. The Zondo Commission established that contrary to this norm, there is an inadequate level of responsibility in the South African public sector, which has provided opportunities for corruption. Failure to properly hold top government officials accountable has resulted in the misuse of government resources and acts of fraud (Wille, 2016:700). Ubisi (2018) further notes that a lack of public accountability hinders service delivery in South Africa.

Various studies have been conducted to explore misconduct in the service delivery sectors. Maile (2022) investigated corruption and misbehaviour with a micro-level concentration in a chosen national government department. Future research by other scholars could cover other public service departments in South Africa as comparative studies (macro-level). The results indicated that the most efficient way to reduce corruption and nepotism could be to set up oversight agencies. Establishing an ethical culture requires adherence to the King Reports and Codes. The conceptual frameworks for effective governance and organisational ethical management were thoroughly explained in the study. To foster an ethical culture within the Local Government Sector Education Training Authority (LGSETA), a study by Mothabi (2022) followed the fourth King Code of Corporate Governance, also known as King IV. With a focus on ethics and ethical culture, the study offered insights into the conceptual frameworks related to King IV.

Mlambo, Mpanza, and Simangele's (2023) study examines the conflict between corruption and governance in South Africa's public sector. To address the central question of this study, it conceptualises the concept and origin of good governance and uses a narrative literature review. According to the report, corruption has plagued South Africa for years, wasting billions of government dollars through wasteful spending. According to a study by Sithomola (2024), the decline of good governance, socioeconomic development, and public trust in public institutions has been further exacerbated by corruption and unethical behaviour among public personnel. South Africa's campaign against corruption has become a symbolic endeavour that has not produced the desired results, despite its adherence to compliance or rule-based ethics. The article's main conclusions show that results are not assured by simply implementing a compliance-based public sector. Only when consequence management is implemented through robust institutions that are not influenced by the political climate can the rule-based approach produce the desired results. According to a study by Dhlamini (2025), until the country focuses on the precise location and mode of financial misconduct and corruption, it will be hard to eradicate these issues in the South African public sector. By examining corruption in state-owned enterprises, the study concentrated on the areas of the government where corruption takes place. Since SOEs provide essential commodities and services in critical economic sectors, many citizens' basic needs go unmet in this corrupt government sector. The report covered Eskom, the biggest state-owned enterprise (SOE) in South Africa, and the parastatal's numerous financial mismanagement and corruption over the years, leaving it unstable and hard to maintain (Dhlamini, 2025). The literature analysis demonstrates that, with emphasis on the public service sector, the aspects of misconduct and corruption are continuously investigated and addressed in a South African setting. However, there isn't a thorough explanation of the specific accountability component.

The study aims to close this gap by concentrating on the elements that make it more challenging to carry out accountability effectively, making it more difficult to combat misbehaviour and corruption in the public sector.

ISSN 2669-0195 (online) https://jssidoi.org/ird/
2025 Volume 7 Number 3 (September)
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Despite 30 years of democracy, South African public service faces significant public accountability and malfeasance challenges. According to Munzhedzi (2016:6), South Africa continues to face numerous issues because of a lack of accountability. This suggests that accountability in the South African public sector is compromised (Sindelo, 2024:1).

The article discusses the areas where accountability challenges are witnessed, factors impeding the successful execution of accountability, and, hence, the prevalence of corruption in South Africa. It also proposes recommendations for improvement.

2. Accountability Challenges in South African Public Service

Most government institutions have been grappling with enforcing effective and efficient accountability mechanisms. It is essential to delve into some key areas where accountability challenges are prevalent in the public sector. Financial transgressions were documented in the 2016/17 fiscal year, including irregular expenditure, financial misconduct, misappropriation and misuse, theft, fraud, unapproved spending, and corruption. Government departments at the national level reported more cases resolved than provincial government departments, according to the Public Service Commission (PSC) Report (2017, 2020, 2023; Maile, 2022:65).

Figure 1 below depicts the quarterly trend analysis of alleged corruption from the 2017/18 to the 2020/21 financial year.

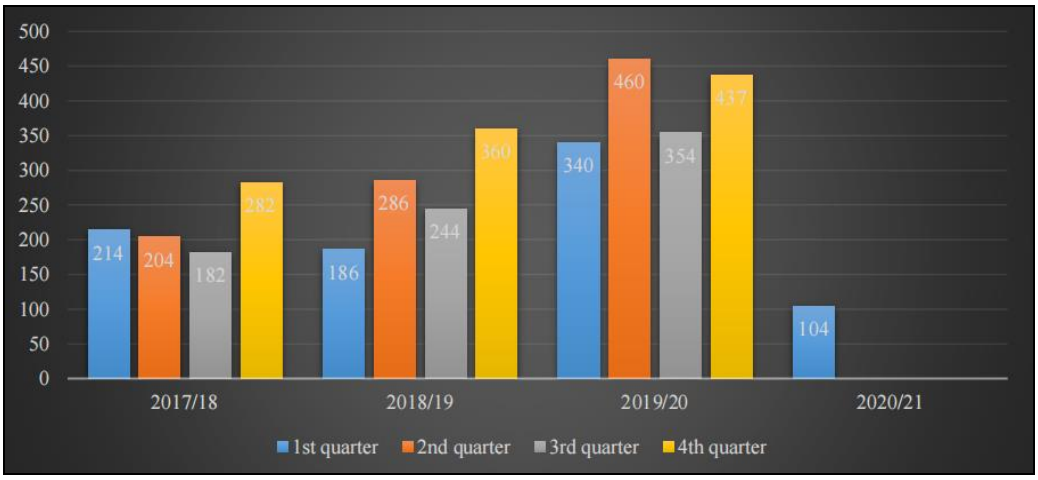


Fig. 1. Trend Analysis of Cases of Alleged Corruption Recorded from 2017/18 to the 2020/21 Financial Year
Source: PSC, 2020:16; Maile and Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023:12

Figure 2 shows the total number of misconduct instances reported by national departments between 2017/18 and 2020/21.

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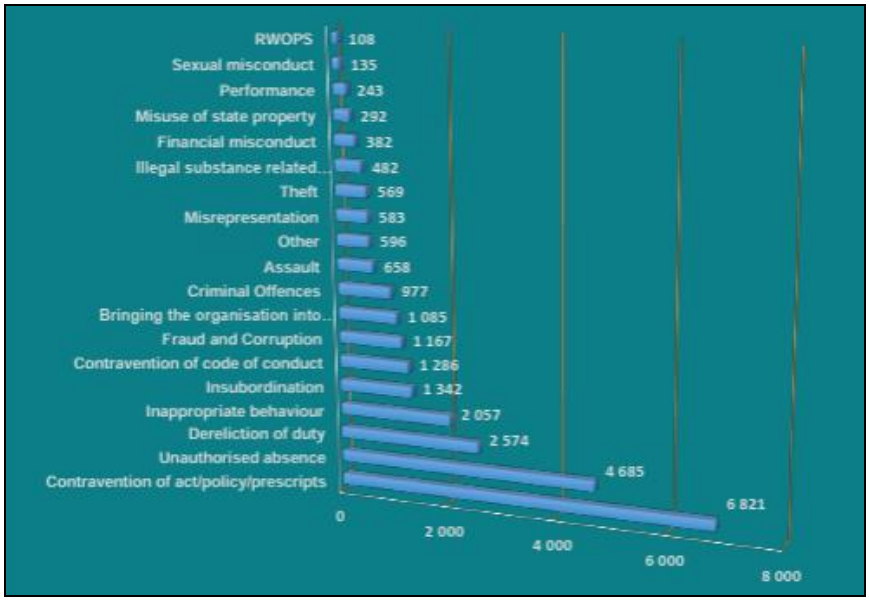


Fig. 2. Cumulative Misconduct Cases for National Departments (2017/18 to 2020/21)
Source: PSC, 2022:8
Note: the figure is copied from the PSC 2022 document. There are some incomplete explanations on the y-axis in the figure. The full description is stated here as: RWOPS stands for Remunerative Work Outside the Public Service; Illegal substance related transgressions; and Bringing the organisation into disrepute.

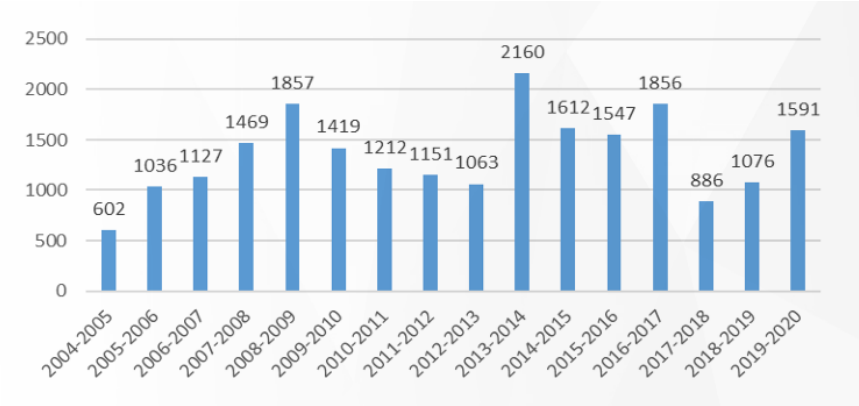
Figure 2 depicts the varying pattern of *contravention of act/policy/prescripts* incidents over four years, indicating that public service policies and guidelines are being disregarded. It is concerning when the same misbehaviours keep happening over time because it either indicates poor consequence management or a lack of required leadership (PSC, 2022:8). Inadequate internal controls may also be a factor in the increasing number of *conventions of act/policy/prescripts* situations. Most of these cases involved the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the Department of Correctional Services (DCS). Common violations for the DCS and SAPS included breaking of security measures, participation in unprocedural, unprotected, industrial action, non-disclosure of financial interest, and releasing a prisoner without proper authority; however, it was unclear which prescripts were broken in particular situations (PSC, 2022:8).

The Corruption Watch 2021 Annual Report reports many forms of misbehaviour. The following are some of the misbehaviour figures highlighted in the report, summarised by the author (Corruption Watch, 2021: 31; Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2022: 16):

- Maladministration (highest) (18%)
- Corruption in procurement (second highest) (16%)
- Misuse of power (also second highest) (16%)
- Fraud (high) (14%),
- Resource theft (second high) (12%)
- Neglect of responsibilities (significant to reduce) (8%)
- (8%), bribery or extortion (significant to combat) (8%)
- Corruption in employment (significant to correct) (8%)

The trend of continued corruption patterns recorded from 2004 till 2020 is stated in Graph 1.

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2025 Volume 7 Number 3 (September)
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Graph 1. Cases of alleged corruption since the inception of the National Anti-Corruption Hotline (NACH) from September 2004 to March 2020
Source: PSC, 2020; Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2024a: 456.

Lack of accountability could be a significant factor. Accountability is directly related to responsibility for decisions, actions, outcomes, and policies. Effective execution, moral leadership, integrity-driven management, and clean government are synonymous with accountability. Each person in the public service pyramid has clearly defined responsibilities for each job position, or they should be required to take responsibility for the performance, inputs, outputs, and results of their operations (Pillay, 2016:116; Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2024a:457). In addition to the existing legislative bodies, rules, and laws, elected officials cannot be held politically accountable if they do not listen to, value, and respond to the people. Accountability refers to the obligation of those in positions of power to defend, justify, and take ownership of their decisions, actions, and results. Administrators must behave according to the commitments and requirements outlined in laws, regulations, guidelines, procedures, and policies, as emphasised by Vian (2020:2) and adapted by Vyas-Doorgapersad (2024a:457). While not always a sign of corruption, failing to hold people accountable suggests a pattern or, at the very least, a sign of possible issues. There are powerful incentives to keep corruption hidden, particularly when it involves influential individuals or groups (Sole, 2005:87). The section below explores accountability challenges in specific areas as part of the study.

2.1 Financial Management

Financial misconduct in the public sector is well documented. PSC (2023: 13) statistics for all national departments from the 2013/2014 and 2021/2022 financial years reveal several financial misconduct cases, with the number of instances fluctuating over that period. Nevertheless, the amounts involved seem to be gradually increasing, with the most excessive amount being R999,095,598 in the 2021/22 fiscal year, with only 235 cases across all national ministries and only 8% legally accused (PSC, 2023: 13). Only R174,532 010, or 5.4%, of the R3,211,610,817 lost by the state due to financial wrongdoing has been recovered, while R1,847,057,816, or 58%, remains unrecoveredn (PSC, 2023:13).

One of the challenges identified in the literature relates to a lack of skills and capacity among public sector employees. Inadequate talent is one of the key variables influencing the performance of public sector financial management. According to Abdulai, Salakpi, and Nasse (2021:4), staffing deficiencies can lead to poor management, errors, and hostility in certain circumstances. Furthermore, Abdulai et al. (2021:4) state that adequate staffing and workforce management are crucial to effectively executing internal auditing. However, some officials nominated to critical positions do not meet all the standards and lack the essential skills to perform their duties (Abdulai et al., 2021:6). According to Dodo (2017:19), a lack of technical experience and financial auditing skills is a major contributor to audit committee ineffectiveness. This problem has become more prevalent in local government settings.

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2025 Volume 7 Number 3 (September)
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According to the Auditor General of South Africa (AGSA) (2021:8), local governments depend on consultants to prepare financial accounts and examine underlying data for significant accounting discrepancies. Over R1 billion was spent on consultants for financial reporting services during the 2019/20 fiscal year (AGSA, 2021:8). Consequently, the complex difficulties continue to hinder management's ability to conduct timely, creditable audits. The AGSA (2021:8) further states that insufficient training, limited skill sets, inexperienced auditors, vague audit objectives, poor report writing abilities, and demotivation have all contributed to the low calibre of the work.

A lack of consequence management is one of the challenges impeding effective financial management. According to Abdulai et al. (2021:6), auditing staff spend an extended period reviewing numerous records and other material, negatively impacting productivity. As a result, Abdulai et al. (2021:6) note that auditing encounters difficulties, such as fake financial reporting and audit failures. Furthermore, audit committees lack the jurisdiction to summon government departments for poor performance or failure to submit required financial statements on time. As a result, the committees have limited options and their requests for data are routinely denied. It is noted that this significantly affects their capacity to provide the council with timely financial and institutional performance reports (Toxopeüs, 2019).

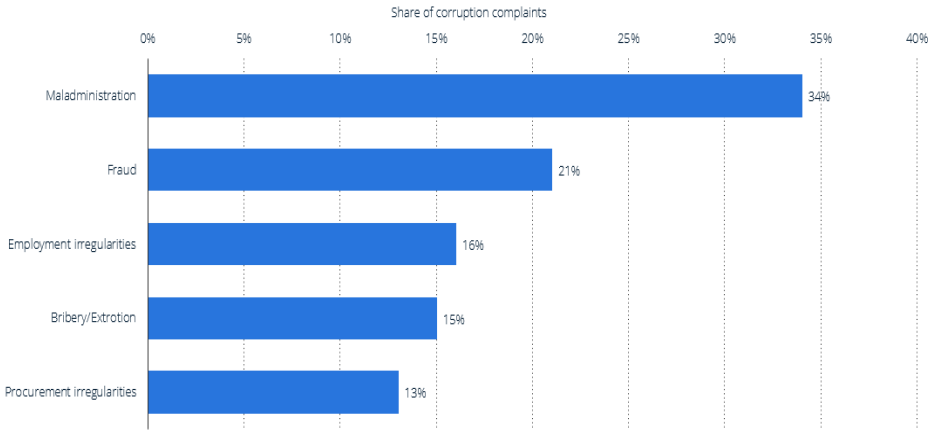
Rampant corruption in the public sector has also hindered sound financial accountability. The study shows corruption increases when public sector organisations lack adequate financial monitoring. Corruption Watch has received more than 5,000 reports of misconduct in the public sector since its establishment in 2012 (Corruption Watch, 2021:1). These investigations provide a disturbing overview of how some government agencies have been seized for personal gain, how local officials misuse their authority and position, and how hiring and procurement procedures are regularly compromised. This prevents disadvantaged populations from accessing essential services and human rights (Corruption Watch, 2021:1).

2.2 Procurement

Public sector procurement practices and systems have been scrutinised since the new democratic dispensation in South Africa. Evidence suggests that the Lack of accountability has exacerbated supply chain management and procurement challenges. One of the documented challenges relates to weak enforcement of procurement legislation, which results in repeated procurement violations (Simone & Balasundharam, 2023: 1). While this is partly due to the fractured statutory and regulatory environment, organisations' inability to implement rules governing procurement is also a significant issue. According to Simone and Balasundharam (2023: 1), suppliers take advantage of enforcement flaws, resulting in repeated violations such as extortion, favouritism, conflicts of interest, collusion and bid rigging, misuse and manipulation of data and procedures, and waste and misuse of public funds.

According to the 2020/21 Auditor General report, an unfair and insufficiently competitive procurement process is the most frequent procurement complaint, even in enterprises with clean audits. Government agencies' adoption of suitable procurement procedures and ability to sufficiently justify exclusions from competitive procurement are other issues (AGSA, 2021:5). Graph 2 shows that corruption in procurement practices is one of the prevalent forms of misconduct and requires corrective measures.

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Graph 2. Prevalence of National Corruption in South Africa as of 2023 by Type
Source: Corruption Watch (2023); Statista (2024); Vyas-Doorgapersad (2024b:87)

Limited transparency across the different phases of public procurement encourages misconduct (Nzimakwe & Biyela, 2021). Transparency in government contracting not only improves honesty, promotes accountability, and assists in preventing misconduct, thereby fostering confidence in government entities, but it also plays a substantial part in levelling the playing field among companies and permitting small and medium-sized enterprises to get involved in an equal footing (PSC, 2023:14). Nevertheless, without a complete listing of all tenders that have been bid on for the fiscal year 2022/23, it is impossible to ascertain that all tenders were posted (PSC, 2023: 14). The same passion for promoting bids is not shared for publishing details regarding granted tenders because the necessary detail on awarded bids is rarely expressed on both the e-tenders portal and departmental websites, which limits accountability. Procurement contributes significantly to the growth of South Africa's economy and is crucial for the effective delivery of government services. Nevertheless, citizens and taxpayers do not receive adequate value for their money because this region is prone to waste and corruption. A lack of respect for the profession has culminated in a shortage of strategic talents in supply chain management (Nzimakwe, 2023:14). It has been noted that one of the key difficulties in South Africa's government and government-owned businesses remains the Lack of a suitable skilled and capacitated workforce, particularly in supply chain management (Nzimakwe, 2023:14).

2.3 Political Accountability

The concept of political accountability in the context of South African public service demonstrates numerous issues that jeopardise accountability, openness, and confidence among citizens. These issues stem from historical, organisational, and socioeconomic causes. It is worth noting that corruption and maladministration in the public sector have hindered political accountability. The occurrence of state control, in which wealthy individuals exert excessive influence over the choices made by governments, has significantly damaged measures to improve accountability. Prominent examples, such as those disclosed by the Zondo Commission of Inquiry into State Capture, include systematic misconduct in procurement procedures, government-owned companies, and even law enforcement (Zondo Commission Report, 2022). Furthermore, criminal activity and the theft of taxpayer monies siphon resources intended for providing public services, undermining confidence in the government. Notwithstanding the presence of corruption prevention organisations such as the Special Investigating Unit (SIU) and the Public Protector, execution is sometimes sluggish or inefficient because of heavy political involvement and limited resources (Transparency International, 2023).

Evidence also points to the reality that weak institutional frameworks have undermined political accountability in public service. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2022), several government institutions lack the capital, competencies and expertise needed for successful oversight and

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2025 Volume 7 Number 3 (September)
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accountability enforcement. It can be documented that the involvement of politicians in the main activities of key accountability agencies, such as the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) and the South African Revenue Service (SARS), has weakened their sense of autonomy and independence (Institute for Security Studies, 2021). Moreover, evidence also points to disjointed or fragmented supervision systems, with multiple roles and insufficient collaboration among key entities, such as the Public Protector, Auditor General, and Parliament, undermining the aggregate efficacy of holding government officials responsible (Public Protector South Africa, 2023).

Nepotism and political patronage have played a devastating role in undermining accountability in the South African public sector. The deployment of cadres, in which the party in power assigns loyalists to critical governmental positions, has been widely condemned for prioritising ideological allegiance over ability and performance (Institute for Security Studies, 2021). This is further explored by Adanlawo and Chaka (2024: 266), who argue that cadre deployment compromises the government's efforts to promote sound financial management and accountability, especially in the local government setup, in which elected officials dominate.

Meaningful community participation is essential for keeping government officials accountable, but the country faces significant obstacles. Low levels of public engagement, particularly among vulnerable populations, often result from a lack of information or access to procedures for accountability (OECD, 2022). Additionally, widespread disdain for government institutions deters citizens from engaging in oversight mechanisms. Consequently, minimal political and educational initiatives result in many South Africans being uninformed of their constitutional entitlements or how to hold authority figures accountable (South African Human Rights Commission, 2022).

3. Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The study aims to identify accountability challenges in South African public service. The research questions, therefore, are: What are the accountability challenges in public service? What are the factors that are impeding the effective implementation of accountability? What are the policy recommendations to ensure accountability in a country-specific context?

Non-numerical textual, visual, or auditory data was gathered and analysed to address the research questions and accomplish the study's goals, making the study qualitative. Qualitative research is frequently used in the humanities and social sciences. It is done to gain a comprehensive understanding of a problem, to generate new research ideas, or to comprehend experiences, ideas, or points of view, as suggested by Bhandari (2020:1) and adapted by Maile (2022:8). Denzin and Lincoln (2005, cited in University of Southern California, 2018:1; and considered by Bangani, 2019:9; Maile, 2022:8-9) further emphasise that qualitative researchers emphasise the close interaction between the researcher and the study subject, the social construction of reality, and the influence of environmental restrictions on research. These academics emphasise how inquiry is a value-laden process. The problems they seek to solve focus on how social experiences are constructed and interpreted.

The information was compiled using a document review. First, since data is frequently publicly available, modern researchers often avoid the time-consuming procedure of obtaining formal authorisation to contact participants, and they do not require authorisation to view secondary materials (Jensen et al., 2022:1149). Second, document evidence is frequently accessible in software-compatible formats, such as spreadsheets, which researchers can readily enter into contemporary data analysis tools (Saunders & Lewis, 2018:94). Third, because document reviews are nonintrusive, they do not require direct respondents or the laborious procedure to gather data (Pederson et al., 2020:59). Fourth, researchers can easily synthesise documentary evidence into a single, comprehensive report by combining several secondary document data sets from surveys or other studies (Pederson et al., 2020:59). This approach adds to the documentary evidence's authentication process by allowing

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2025 Volume 7 Number 3 (September)
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the public to examine it further (Saunders & Lewis, 2018:95). Last but not least, documentary material facilitates contemporary research by offering a contextual backdrop, which makes it simpler to generate unique discoveries (Pederson et al., 2020:59). Consequently, the study employed a document review to enhance the findings' credibility and provide more context. Official South African government papers were among the documents examined, such as reports from the Public Service Commission, Transparency International, Corruption Watch, Statista, Auditor General reports, and legislative Acts and frameworks.

The process of fitting a study to a specific framework that gives meaning to a large amount of gathered data is known as qualitative data analysis (Alyamahdy & Alabri, 2013:1; Mothabi, 2022:10). Both document and conceptual analysis were used to analyse the data for this investigation. Vyas-Doorgapersad and Nyikadzino (2020:236) indicate that critically examining a substantial amount of written content is part of document analysis.

One popular framework in the study of societal accountability is the principle-agent theory. It is essential because it offers a versatile framework for simulating a variety of institutional contexts and evaluating the probability that certain institutional arrangements will persuade actors to behave as planned (Gailmard, 2014:91; Dhlamini, 2025:25). Adam Smith offers one of the earliest explanations of the principal-agent phenomena in his book *The Wealth of Nations*. He describes a corporate structure wherein proprietors, or owners, designate or hire managers or agents to run their businesses on their behalf (Smith, 2005:96; Dhlamini, 2025:25). This theory looks at partnerships where one party (the principal) gives another (the agent) responsibilities so that the agent can act on behalf of the principal. The government is the leading actor in government-public servant partnerships, designating workers as agents in the execution of policies meant to promote the development of human capital (Kofar-Sauri, 2023:3; Dhlamini, 2025:25).

4. Discussion and Findings

Based on the findings, this section discusses factors that impede the effective implementation of accountability and cause corruption in South Africa. Corruption in South Africa is a malignancy that has consistently hindered socioeconomic progress, poverty reduction, and effective governance in the nation. Multiple studies by various organisations regarding South African citizens' views on corruption reveal an escalating belief that the government is ineffectively addressing corruption, which is progressively worsening despite numerous initiatives implemented to mitigate it. According to Ntoyanto (2019:1), South African political role-players have responded to national and global expectations and pressure to mitigate increasing corruption in the public sector in the last decade. This has resulted in the creation of various legislative measures, specialised investigative task forces, committees, units, and commissions of inquiry. Most of these are established individually, resulting in no charges or penalties for the culpable parties. Numerous monitoring organisations and citizens have articulated concerns that the overt impunity to senior civil personnel erodes accountability and fosters corruption.

South Africa achieved democracy in 1994; despite this milestone, corruption continues to escalate in both the public and commercial sectors. Since 1994, South Africa's shift to a nonracial democracy has been marred by recurrent occurrences and accusations of governmental corruption, implicating elected leaders and civil personnel (Naidoo, 2013:522). The public is inundated with weekly media coverage of fresh and longstanding corruption reports. Corruption in the public sector typically arises from public officials exploiting their positions for personal benefit (Naidoo, 2013). The persistent issue within the public sector is corruption, which indicates that instances of unlawful and unethical conduct by politicians and public servants are a persistent characteristic and an inherent risk within the public sector (Naidoo, 2013). This risk obstructs sustainable development, foreign direct investment, service provision, and poverty reduction. Corruption poses a significant danger to the nation's development for several reasons. Over the past twenty years, the government has enacted various anti-corruption measures. These strategies have produced limited outcomes (Budhram & Geldenhuys, 2018; Gray, 2021). The recent misuse of the COVID-19 relief fund, testimony regarding tender discrepancies, scandals at the Ministry of

ISSN 2669-0195 (online) https://jssidoi.org/ird/
2025 Volume 7 Number 3 (September)
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Health, and the killing of a whistleblower in the Gauteng Health Department indicate that corruption remains endemic in the country (Patel & Govindasamy, 2021).

Over the past decade, multiple commissions have been established to investigate allegations of corruption and misconduct by government officials. Additional investigation units have been established in accordance with suggestions from the Office of the Public Protector and Parliament. These inquiries and commissions of inquiry have revealed fraudulent activities involving multiple government officials, including former president Jacob Zuma. Allegations of corruption against Zuma emerged before his presidency, continued throughout his tenure, and persisted until the conclusion of his administration (Labik Amanquandor, 2024; Gray, 2021). Corruption at elevated echelons, including that of the president, undermines societal morals and perceptions of corruption. Corruption in the public sector primarily involves individual government officials, business owners, and the ruling party. Government officials affiliated with the ruling party provide preferential treatment to company owners, who, in exchange, offer favours to the ruling party or compensate the particular public official. When inquiries are initiated to expose these unethical practices, corrupt public officials obstruct those probes (Ntoyanto, 2019: 2).

The primary issue in combating and eliminating corruption in the public sector has been the absence of consequence management for individuals accused of corruption and the inconclusiveness of corruption cases (Manyaka & Nkuna, 2014). Corruption cases may persist for years without a definitive resolution. Numerous public officials in South Africa have evaded prosecution. The Lack of accountability perpetuates a culture of corruption that increasingly becomes normalised because anti-corruption authorities function more as watchdogs than guard dogs.

The second challenge arises from political interference, which affects the ability of anti-corruption institutions to conduct investigations. Former employees of the Scorpions expressed concerns that the dissolution of their essential crime investigation unit, subsequently replaced by the Hawks, was intended to shield influential members of the ruling party under investigation at the time (Naidoo, 2013). The unit was established following decisions made by the African National Congress (ANC) at its 52nd National Conference. Naidoo (2013) argues that the ANC advocated establishing such a unit in response to increasing corruption. This example illustrates the influence of politics, as a decision made by a political party during its conference resulted in the establishment of a specialised unit. The complexities of political meddling and the politicised nature of anti-corruption in South Africa are significant. [There is] no evidence that the structure of institutions may overcome this problem, given the notable efficacy of collective political actions. It can be assumed that top political leaders' commitment, willingness, and ethical conduct will enhance the effectiveness of anti-corruption enforcement in South Africa (Mphendu & Holtzhausen, 2016). The third difficulty pertains to the functions of commissions of inquiry and the judiciary. Commissions of inquiry lack binding authority over their conclusions and recommendations and the capacity to impose penalties on the culpable (Ntoyanto, 2019: 3).

Commissions of inquiry are authorised solely to provide recommendations to the individual who initiated the panel, typically the president. Furthermore, these recommendations are grounded in the scope of their investigation. Commissions of inquiry are often established by terms of reference pursuant to Section 84(2)(f) of the Constitution (Ntoyanto, 2019: 3). According to Section 1 of the Commissions Act, 1947 (Act No. 8 of 1947), the president proclaims the provisions of the relevant Act concerning the commission and establishes regulations pertinent to it. The commission possesses the authority to exercise procedural discretion during the investigation process and to choose the desired level of confidentiality for the inquiry (Ntoyanto, 2019: 3).

In the context of local governance, April and Sebola (2016) note that the appointment of senior officials predominantly relies on political connections and employment equity. The Lack of meritocracy has resulted in numerous departments being led by ineffective leaders who fail to implement the nation's anti-corruption laws and

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2025 Volume 7 Number 3 (September)
http://doi.org/10.70132/n5486947758

policies, thus fostering institutional settings that reinforce unethical and nepotistic behaviour (Majila et al., 2014; Manyaka & Nkuna, 2014). Public administrators must embody their organisation's code of conduct and professional standards in their daily behaviour to enhance the ethical climate of their workplaces (Parboteeah et al., 2014). Unfortunately, several public sector agencies in South Africa are managed by unethical leaders who exploit systemic loopholes for personal benefit (Odeku, 2019:11). Bribery and corruption exist even among the highest levels of the country's anti-corruption enforcement agencies (Olutola, 2014).

South Africa's anti-corruption institutional framework is underpinned by a comprehensive array of laws, rules, and regulations, establishing approximately 19 institutions, agencies, and coordinating mechanisms (Pillay, 2017). Dassah (2014) identifies that the country's model is plagued by the inherent weaknesses of the multi-agency framework, including red-tapism, patronage networking, and inter-agency rivalry.

The mandates of anti-corruption agencies are ambiguous and overlapping, prompting some analysts to contend that the model suffers from inadequate oversight, coordination, a cohesive strategic framework, and a central principal agency (Chetty & Pillay, 2017; Pillay, 2017). Based on the findings, the study proposes an analytical framework called the Accountability Framework for Public Service (see Figure 3).

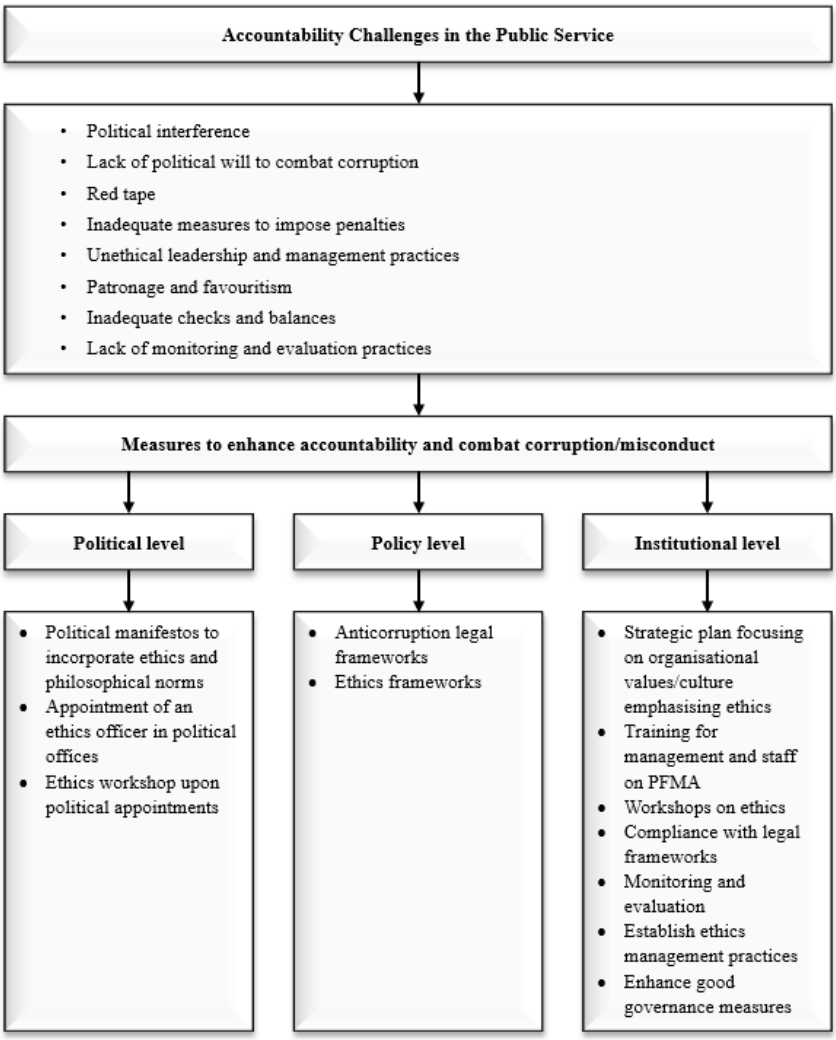


Figure 3. Accountability Framework for Public Service
Source: Author's compilation based on secondary information, 2025.

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Based on the challenges explored in the study, the article proposes that specific measures are required to enhance accountability and combat corruption and misconduct in the public service. These measures are suggested at three levels: political, policy, and institutional. *At the political level*, it is imperative that political parties incorporate ethics and philosophical norms in their manifestos. Since ethics and concern for the inner world, rather than the outer, became the main focus of thought and inquiry in the fifth century BC, it is important to note that Socrates, who is considered the founder of moral philosophy, is credited with the pivotal moment that marked the shift in philosophy from physics to ethics (Makrydemetres, 2002:3; Vyas-Doorgapersad & Ababio, 2006:386; Vyas-Doorgapersad & Simmonds, 2011:58). Ethics is a natural concern when discussing the actual role of politicians and state administration, but it is rarely brought up in ideological debates about the state's purpose. Public officials and politicians both have discretionary authority; their choices have a significant impact on a large number of people. Therefore, some form of ethics should guide these decisions (Amundsen & de Andrade, 2009: 10-11; Maile, 2022:22). Concerns about the general processes of the globalisation of market economies and information technology, as well as the localisation of political conflict, authority structures, and culture, are the issues that public administration practitioners and scholars face in many countries. To achieve good governance, these developments spark discussions about how ethics are applied at different levels of authority (Vyas-Doorgapersad & Ababio, 2010:412-413; Maile, 2022:22-23). The article's stated incidents violate public administration norms; hence, according to Vyas-Doorgapersad and Simmonds (2011:56), as cited by Mothabi and Vyas-Doorgapersad (2022:369), to establish an atmosphere of excellent corporate governance, public administration must collaborate with the normative instruments of integrity, honesty, and ethics. This requires a normative approach to instil ethical public administration and management frameworks. Vyas-Doorgapersad and Shava (2021:45-46) and Mothabi and Vyas-Doorgapersad (2022:369) suggest that, consequently, the successful application of moral principles leads to the development of a value-driven public administration. Hence, it is recommended that political parties adopt normative values and align their ideologies with ethical principles. Incorporating ethics in manifestos may also foster trust among voters when they see their representatives abiding by moral principles and values. Voters may also view their political representatives as role models and adopt their moral values on both personal and professional fronts. This may seem hypothetical; however, charismatic leaders can establish an ethical path for people to follow, but this takes time, courage, and strength. It is significant to note that good governance always has the upper hand over maladministration when public administration processes, systems, and structures are enveloped with normative principles and become an abiding force for role-players. At the political level, it is also suggested that political parties appoint an ethics officer to oversee the internal governance processes. The ethics officer can offer guidance regarding the consequences of misconduct and inform party members to remain ethical in dealings and behaviour. The ethics officer may organise workshops to inform party members about ethical frameworks. Such workshops may be organised with political appointments so that members can be equipped with a moral understanding of processes and dealings as they commence their political journey.

At the policy level, it is suggested that anti-corruption laws and ethical frameworks be established for public servants. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) emphasises that high standards of professional ethics be maintained. The other legislative frameworks listed here are the Public Entities Act, No. 93 of 1992, the Public Service Act, No. 122 of 1994, the Investigation of Serious Economic Offenses Act, No. 46 of 1995, the Employment Equity Act, No. 55 of 1998, the Executive Member's Ethics Act, No. 82 of 1998, the Public Finance Management Act, No. 1 of 1999, the Promotion of Administrative Justice Act, No. 3 of 2000, the Protected Disclosures Act, No. 26 of 2000, the Public Audit Act, No. 25 of 2004, the Prevention and Combating of Corrupt Activities Act, No. 12 of 2004, and the Public Administrative Management Act, No.11 of 2014 (Maile, 2022). These Acts guide public servants to act ethically and morally in all their professional dealings.

At an institutional level, it is recommended that the ethical norms established at the political and policy levels be implemented to create an environment of good governance. This requires strategic role-players to ensure their organisational/business plans focus on the organisational values of honesty, transparency, accountability, and

ethical principles. Staff must receive continuous training under the PFMA. The human resource manager or labour relations manager may schedule workshops on ethics for all new appointees to understand the consequences of misconduct and the importance of adhering to the ethical culture in the workplace. Staff must adhere to legislative frameworks discussed at the policy level, and compliance must be documented. Monitoring and evaluating organisational structures, systems, and processes are required to ensure that all checks and balances are in place and that oversight mechanisms are effective. It is suggested that public service must have organisational ethics management (OEM) procedures in place. OEM gives businesses the ability to control and guide workplace ethics. These programmes must establish educational and ethical standards as well as decision-making methods. Staff members must understand these standards, and those who practice ethical management must be diligent in monitoring and evaluating employee morale. The first step in the ethics management process is to develop a collection of essential principles that specify the organisation's ethical charter (Hamid & Nezhad, 2014: 9956; Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2022:22). Considering the views of Vyas-Doorgapersad and Simmonds (2011), Thonzhe and Vyas-Doorgapersad (2017: 146) suggested that these principles provide the basis of responsible and accountable behaviour at all levels of government when combined with values and morals. To think logically and be dedicated, policymakers and public managers benefit from employing philosophical tools which use a normative approach. These measures help establish an environment of good governance, characterised by accountability, transparency, honesty, effectiveness, and efficiency, and combat corruption and misconduct in the public service.

5. Conclusion

The study's limitation is its Lack of empirical evidence. The topic is sensitive, and conducting interviews with public service employees may not have been successful. Obtaining ethical clearance to conduct interviews in the public service departments may have been rejected on the grounds of protecting the organisational image. Employees are also expected not to divulge confidential information, which is against work ethics. Consequently, the author maintained research ethics and scholarly decorum, focusing on compiling information from publicly available sources. Future studies may use a qualitative desktop analysis to explore the accountability challenges in the selected public service departments. This may become part of a longitudinal and comparative study, contributing to public management, ethics, and development studies.

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