

Service Delivery Challenges Facing Municipalities: A Case Study of Fetakgomo Local Municipality in Sekhukhune District Municipality, Limpopo Province.

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Abstract: *It is generally accepted that the biggest challenge facing South African municipalities, particularly smaller municipalities, is service delivery. This case study of FetaKgomo Local Municipality situated in Sekhukhune District Municipality of Limpopo Province focuses on the main causes of service delivery challenges and the impact of these challenges with the aim of identifying ways to minimize such challenges. A qualitative design was used and data were collected from 30 participants by means of questionnaires and interviews. The majority of the respondents identified clean water, job opportunities and free basic services as the main service delivery challenges facing municipalities. The study found that political interference in the administration of municipalities is a further challenge. While public participation in municipal affairs is a legal requirement, much remains to be done to achieve effective participation. Sanitation has always been a service delivery challenge, especially in rural municipalities, mainly due to a lack of infrastructure. Finally, it was found that municipalities need to do more to build human capacity to deliver services.*

Keywords: capacity; social development; backlogs; finance; accountable governance

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Introduction

It is generally accepted that the biggest challenges facing South African municipalities lie in the area of service delivery, and that there is very little capacity for social development programmes. Despite South Africa's middle-income status, half its citizens lack adequate nutrition, water, energy, shelter, health-care and education. The challenges confronting municipalities, including segregation, institutional weaknesses, service delivery backlogs and a lack of finance, need to be overcome (Lee 2012). Furthermore, municipalities should do more to encourage a culture of community participation as well as more transparent and accountable governance. In seeking solutions, it is important to acknowledge that the 283 municipalities across the country are confronted by different social and economic challenges and also have different capacity to respond to these challenges (Lee 2012; Parnell 2002). Thus, each municipality should focus on developing capacity to respond to the needs of the communities in their areas of jurisdiction. Local municipalities could play an important role in ensuring that democracy works for the poor at grassroots level. This article investigates the service delivery challenges confronting municipalities through a case study of FetaKgomo Local Municipality in the Sekhukhune District Municipality of Limpopo Province. Its objectives are to identify the main causes of the service delivery challenges facing municipalities; assess the impact of these challenges on communities; and identify ways to minimize them. The findings will be useful for future planning on the part of the government, municipalities and the private sector (Jesuit and Synch 2012).

Problem Statement

Many small municipalities in South Africa are struggling to operate and maintain their services infrastructure in a cost-effective and sustainable manner. The end result is predictable: the rapid deterioration of assets, followed by catastrophic component failure, and regular and prolonged disruptions to service delivery. The challenges have to do with the general rendering of services to the community; procedures to appoint new staff members; irregularities and deficiencies in procurement procedures; leakages and the overflowing of sewerage systems; a general lack of consultation; and a lack of cooperation between municipalities and the business community.

Aim of the Study

This article investigates the service delivery challenges facing municipalities, through a case study of FetaKgomo Local Municipality.

Its objectives are to:

- Explore the main causes of service delivery challenges facing municipalities.

- Assess the impact of service delivery challenges on communities.
- Identify ways to minimize service delivery challenges.

Main Research Questions

- What are the main causes of service delivery challenges?
- What impact do service delivery challenges have on communities?
- How can service delivery challenges be minimized?

Literature Review

This section highlights the far-reaching service delivery challenges facing municipalities in the Republic of South Africa, particularly Limpopo Province by means of a review of the relevant literature.

Local government and service delivery

Service delivery refers to the provision of public activities, benefits or satisfaction. Service relates to the provision of both tangible public goods and intangible services (Johannison 2007; Venter 2010). In rural areas and small towns, the provision of basic retail, social, health, education, and infrastructure services are a crucial foundation for day-to-day activities and maintaining the quality of life of local citizens as well as the local economic base (Halseth and Ryse 2006; Pollanen 2005). The South African Constitution requires that, municipalities prioritize the basic needs of local communities and ensure that they have access to at least a minimal level of municipal services (Mafunisa 2008). Municipalities should also promote the development of local communities (Venter 2010). In order to improve the delivery of public services, especially on the part of local government, the government of the day has to address the challenges that hamper service delivery in a more coordinated and proactive manner, focusing on macro-goals in order to develop the country's infrastructure and ensure that all citizens benefit (Ching and Chan 2004, Venter 2010).

Service delivery challenges within municipalities in Limpopo Province

The Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs' (Co-GHSTA) Local Government assessment sought to identify the main causes of poor service delivery in municipalities across the country. The results revealed a number of problems within municipalities, but, most importantly, they demonstrated that not all the problems experienced by communities are applicable to all municipalities (Edwards 2015). Many municipalities are struggling to operate and maintain their services infrastructure in a cost-effective and sustainable manner (Appelbaum, Habashy, Malo and Shafiq 2012). The challenges include those relating to the general rendering of services to communities; procedures to appoint new staff members; irregularities and deficiencies in procurement procedures; leakages and overflowing sewerage systems; a general lack of consultation; and the lack of co-operation between municipalities and the business community (Matos, Simoes and Esposito 2012).

Financial crisis in South African municipalities

It is estimated that more than half of South Africa's municipalities are experiencing financial difficulties. Of the 77 councils that responded to an official survey, one fifth only had sufficient cash and investments in reserve to meet a single month's wage bill. National subsidies for municipal infrastructure have been cut and central government has stated its unwillingness to bail out bankrupt local authorities. In response to this uncertain financial position and further contributing to its deterioration, private lending has more or less dried up, except for short-term overdrafts and a few high-interest loans (Fetakgomo Local Municipality 2010/11). A cursory examination of FetaKgomo Municipality's revenue and expenditure for the period 1 July 2010 to 30 June 2011 reveals that government grants and subsidies constituted 71% of total income, an obvious indication that the municipality relies on grant funding to remain solvent. Revenue from property rates and service charges, which should be the municipality's primary source of income, represented only 23% of total income (Van Helden and Huijben 2014). The proceeds from the remaining revenue items (fines, rental income, etc.) made up the balance of 6%. Personnel costs (excluding remuneration of councilors) comprised 24% of total expenditure, which was not excessive (Jesuit and Sych 2012). However, what is of concern is that the income from property rates and service charges is just sufficient to cover personnel costs, leaving no surplus. Repairs and maintenance expenditure was only 1% of total costs (Lee 2012), which confirms that maintaining infrastructure is not prioritized in this municipality (the accepted benchmark is that a budget should be in the order of 1 to 4% of the total asset value (Fetakgomo Local Municipality, 2010/2011; Van Helden and Huijben 2014).

Sanitary infrastructural challenges in Limpopo Province's municipalities

The most obvious failings in most municipalities' technical departments have to do with non-compliance with health and safety legislation (Jaaskelainen and Lonnqvist 2011; Reedy 2003).

The current infrastructure life cycle scenario can be described as "run to destruction" because of the total lack of routine and preventative maintenance; the unfortunate outcome is premature asset failure. Failure to remove screenings at sewer pump stations and at the inlets to wastewater treatment works results in downstream blockages, the clogging of pump impellers and eventual mechanical breakdowns (De Vries and Nemec 2013). Failure to respond to sewer blockages within a reasonable time leads to the discharge of raw sewerage into sensitive natural environments. Water pipe bursts that are not promptly attended to result in considerable water losses and lengthy interruptions in water supply. Because of supply chain bottlenecks, water purification chemicals are often in short supply at remote water treatment plants, resulting in poor quality drinking water (De Vries and Nemec 2013). Kuye (2002) maintained that, due to an acute shortage of funds in municipalities, repairs to a defective pump unit were often postponed until the second (standby) unit failed (it is common practice

to install pump units in both water and sewer pump stations in a duty or standby configuration in order to ensure continuous operation should one unit become defective (Hilliard 2005). The inevitable outcome was prolonged interruptions in service delivery and inconvenience to local residents, as well as the health risks associated with sewerage spills. In addition, the municipality's asset register was not up to date, which made it difficult to trace missing plant and equipment, and compile maintenance plans (Pekkola, Ukko and Melkas 2010).

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach. Hanekom (2006) notes that qualitative research methods were developed in the social sciences to enable researchers to study social and cultural phenomena. The research methodology provides an organized and systematic way to conduct a study in order to answer the research questions. A qualitative, interpretative research approach was appropriate as it enables an understanding of reality through social construction (Lopez and Abod 2013). The research design is the plan in terms of which research participants are selected and information is collected from them.

Population and Sampling

The study population consists of individuals, groups, organizations, human products and events, or the conditions to which they are exposed. It can also refer to a group of potential participants to whom a researcher can generalize the results of a study (Hair, Sarstedt, Hopkins, Volker and Kuppelwieser 2014). The target population was the 120 employees of FetaKgomo Local Municipality, where men occupy the majority of middle management positions, with women in administrative posts (secretarial or clerical positions). Women made up 40% of senior management staff (Sekhukhune District Municipality 2012/13). The sample was 30 officials (25% of the study population), including 15 administrative officers, 10 management level employees and five councilors. Purposive sampling was used in order to ensure that all municipal officials had an equal and independent chance of being selected. Purposeful sampling provides information-rich cases for in-depth study, from which one can learn much about the issues of central importance to the research. The study was conducted from 24 to 28 August 2014 at the FetaKgomo Local Municipality's offices (Barbin and Svensson 2012).

Data Collection

Data collection is the process of obtaining information to address the research problem (Van der Walldt 2007). The data for this study were gathered by means of questionnaires and interviews (Eriksson 2013). The questionnaire comprised 26 questions in section A and additional questions in order to identify the service delivery challenges facing FetaKgomo Local Municipality. It took 30 minutes to

complete. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three officials and two councilors, using an interview guide. A semi-structured interview is flexible and allows new questions to be asked during the interview to further probe a respondent's answers. It enables a researcher to gather rich, detailed data from respondents (Qu and Dumay 2011).

Pilot Study

A pilot study refers to a smaller version of the larger study that is conducted in preparation for that study. A pilot study can be used as a feasibility study, to ensure that the ideas or methods behind the research are sound, as well as to work out the kinks in the study protocol before commencing the larger study. For the purpose of this study, five municipal officials were used for the pilot study (Qu and Dumay 2011). They completed the questionnaire in order to establish whether it communicated the intended message from the researcher to the participants. The responses reflected good understanding and no ambiguity (Parker 2014).

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of collected data and entails categorizing and describing the data in relation to different themes (Lincoln 2007). After all the information was collected, the responses were coded in the same way they were displayed in the questionnaires. The purpose of coding is not only to describe the data, but more importantly to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of interest, to obtain a general sense of the information, identify the patterns and reflect on its overall meaning or make sense of the information concerning the challenges facing municipalities (Guercini 2014).

Research Findings

The completed questionnaires were combined for all the different target groups, and coded in order to ensure the participants' anonymity and data credibility. Questionnaires were issued to 33 potential participants and 30 were returned. The research participants filled in the questionnaires without any help from the researcher. The questionnaires were also quality assured to minimize ambiguity and errors during data capturing. Graphs and tables were used to analyze all the questions. Seven face-to-face interviews were conducted with staff members at FetaKgomo Local Municipality's offices in Apel village. .

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations involve the principles for deciding what is right and wrong. In interactive research, ethical issues have to be considered prior to data collection in order to recognize and protect the rights of individuals. The researcher adhered to the ethical standards appropriate to this study. The respondents' anonymity was assured and no one was harmed during the course of the research (Milpark Business School 2011).

Discussion of Research Findings

The majority of the respondents identified clean water, job opportunities and free basic services as the main challenges facing municipalities. Political interference in municipal administration; a lack of public involvement in municipal planning and programmes, sanitation, capacity building and budgetary constraints were also highlighted.

Capacity Building

The study found that staff members were insufficiently capacitated to perform their duties and functions. Skills development programmes were inadequate and there was weak institutional management. It was also clear that staff capacity building was inadequately catered for in municipal budgets, or not allocated any funds at all. The study also revealed a high incidence of irregular or inappropriate appointments of people with insufficient skills. The fact that FetaKgomo Local Municipality is in a remote area, exacerbates skills shortages. Finally, there seemed to be little understanding of the municipality's spatial economic realities. In response to the question on how to address service delivery challenges, 27% of the respondents recommended staff capacity building.

Public Participation

It is clear that public participation in municipal planning and programmes is still a challenge, despite the fact that this is a legal requirement and not a privilege. Consequently, service delivery related protests erupt on a regular basis. Furthermore, it was found that the lack of genuine participation is in part due to political instability, corruption and politicians' interference in the administration of the municipality and the consequent failure to provide democratic and accountable governance. An open-ended question asked the research respondents to rate service delivery challenges in a number of the key performance areas. Thirty-three per cent indicated that public participation was central to efficient municipal service delivery.

Free Basic Services

The study found that FetaKgomo Local Municipality struggles to provide free basic services to communities in its area of jurisdiction. The main challenge is the lack of relevant infrastructure in rural areas. The respondents pointed to inadequate provision of water, electricity and sanitation. Clean

water was cited by 63.3% of the respondents as the major service delivery challenge facing South African municipalities, followed by sanitation issues (40% of the respondents) and electricity (20% of the respondents).

Inadequate Budgets

A lack of adequate budgets to provide basic services to communities in FetaKgomo Local Municipality was of major concern. Thirty per cent of the respondents indicated that, in order to address service delivery challenges, the budget must be augmented or improved. Most municipalities depend entirely on National Treasury for financial support as they are unable to generate their own revenue. This means that most municipalities are failing a key performance indicator, which is revenue collection within their area of jurisdiction. Municipalities can generate revenue through the sale of electricity and potable water, traffic fines, assessment rates, property rates, etc. However, the findings of this study suggest that rural municipalities find it extremely difficult to adopt such income generating strategies, mainly due to the adverse socio-economic circumstances in their areas of jurisdiction.

Relations between Politicians and Administrative Officials

Sixteen percent of the research participants identified the relations between the municipality's political management team (councilors in particular, and the office of the Mayor, Speaker and the Chief Whip) and the administrative component of the municipality (in particular the office of the Municipal Manager and the Chief Financial Officer) as an area requiring attention. This emerged in response to the question on what could be done to eradicate the service delivery challenges facing South African municipalities. Pointing to the scale of the problem, 77% of the respondents highlighted this issue.

Recommendations

The research respondents offered a number of suggestions to address the service delivery challenges confronting South African municipalities. Public participation is usually carried out through structures such as ward committees, ward councilors and mass meetings. If municipalities were to commit themselves to participatory governance, municipal planning and programmes would be informed by local needs. Instead, communities feel alienated and disconnected from decision-making processes and are thus disempowered. It is believed that citizen engagement increases a municipality's perceived legitimacy. It is therefore recommended that municipalities establish/strengthen and capacitate ward committees to link them and the communities they serve in order to ensure that communities participate actively in service delivery projects. It is common knowledge that South African municipalities are characterized by conflict between politicians and senior administrative office bearers. There is often confusion regarding the duties and functions of the office of the Mayor and the office of the Municipal Manager. Another challenge is that municipal officials cannot divorce party politics from municipal administration. This study found that politicians confuse interference with intervention. This results in some politicians involving themselves in administrative issues, irrespective

of the fact that the Municipal Manager is the legal accounting officer of the municipality. It is therefore recommended that relations between these two critical components of the municipality be harmonized. There are also general perceptions that most municipalities are corrupt, especially when it comes to awarding tenders. Some municipalities and government departments disregard procedures in awarding tenders, in particular municipal infrastructure grant-related tenders. It is believed that municipal tenders are awarded to family members, friends or others connected to senior officials or senior politicians. These perceptions negatively portray South African municipalities both nationally and internationally. They also damage their image in the eyes of business people who want to do business with municipalities or who may want to invest in a particular local municipality. This calls for corruption free local government.

Limitations of the Study

- The study was undertaken in one local municipality (FetaKgomo Local Municipality) within Sekhukhune District Municipality in Limpopo Province. It would have been ideal if the study could have been conducted in all the municipalities in the province.
- Problems are never static, but are dynamic and situational. Therefore, this study cannot claim to have successfully solved all the problems relating to this local municipality.

Further Research

It is recommended that similar research be conducted in both local and district municipalities in South Africa, particularly Limpopo Province. A need also exists for further research in the following areas in order to improve service delivery in South African municipalities:

- **Tension between councillors and bureaucrats**

Conflicts between politicians and municipal senior administrative office bearers are common in South Africa. The confusion of duties and functions usually occurs between the offices of the Mayor and the Municipal Manager. This is regardless of the many pieces of legislation in place that clarify such official roles and the fact that the Municipal Manager is officially the accounting officer of the municipality. Further research on this question is of paramount importance.

- **Public participation**

Public participation is a legal requirement of all local and district municipalities. Municipalities were envisioned as sites where participatory governance would give meaning and content to planning and programmes. Instead, communities feel alienated and disconnected from decision-making processes and are thus disempowered. It is believed that citizen engagement increases the perceived legitimacy of municipalities both by alerting the public to municipalities' constraints and encouraging more effective community leadership at the local sphere of government.

- Curbing corruption

Corruption in South African municipalities, particularly in Limpopo Province, is a major problem. Both politicians and administrators are believed to be corrupt. Corruption is especially prevalent in the awarding of tenders and employment of staff. In response to the question on the main causes of service delivery challenges, 30% of the study respondents selected corruption. In order to effectively address the challenges confronting municipal service delivery, corruption must be curbed. Further research on other areas relating to service delivery would also be useful.

- Free basic services

The main challenge in this regard is the lack of relevant infrastructure, especially in rural municipalities. Municipalities in urban areas are better able to deliver services as most have infrastructure in place in the form of sanitation, electricity, water and waste management facilities. However, this challenge is beyond the sole capability and powers of FetaKgomo Local Municipality. The research respondents regarded the unavailability of basic services as one of the biggest challenges faced by communities. Further research would assist in determining what should be done to effectively address this challenge once and for all.

- Municipalities' role in job creation

The research results reveal concerns about unemployment, which was seen as a contributing factor to the service delivery challenges facing municipal institutions. In response to the question on what could be done to eradicate the service delivery challenges confronting South African municipalities, 27% of the respondents said that municipalities should create an environment that is conducive to job creation. However, in response to the question on how they rated the service delivery challenges experienced by their local municipality, a much higher 67% of the respondents stated that job creation was an important factor. It is thus clear that unemployment is of major concern.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this study's findings and recommendations will assist FetaKgomo Local Municipality and Sekhukhune District Municipality, as well as other South African municipalities, to address the service delivery challenges confronting them. Its recommendations could assist in improving service delivery to communities.

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