

## REDEFINING LOCAL GOVERNMENT WITHIN THE MACRO-DEVELOPMENT AGENDA IN SOUTH AFRICA: A QUEST TO IMPROVE SERVICE DELIVERY

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### Abstract:

The 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa enshrines local government. This study critically examines the evolving role of local government in South Africa's broader development agenda, focusing on persistent service delivery challenges and recent governance reform efforts. Despite being constitutionally autonomous, local government's ability to advance democratic participation and developmental outcomes has been undermined by hierarchical political structures and party-driven dynamics. The study employs three theoretical frameworks: the Democratic Participatory School, emphasizing citizen engagement and accountability; the Efficiency Services School, which stresses responsiveness and operational effectiveness; and the Development School, which views local government as a key driver of socio-economic transformation. A qualitative approach, utilizing secondary data sources such as government reports, policy documents, and scholarly literature, is employed to identify systemic barriers to effective service delivery, including bureaucratic inertia, fiscal constraints, and institutional corruption. Findings highlight the urgent need for governance reforms to strengthen local governments' capacity to fulfill their constitutional mandate. The study advocates for the revision of the 1998 White Paper on Local Government as a critical intervention to address inefficiencies and improve institutional responsiveness. The research concludes with recommendations for enhanced intergovernmental coordination, greater stakeholder participation, and continuous capacity building, emphasizing that a repositioned local government sector is essential for advancing inclusive development and improving the quality of life for South Africans.

**Keywords:** *Efficiency, Local Government, Macro-Development, Medium-Term Development Plan, Service delivery, South Africa*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) formally recognises local government as an autonomous sphere of governance, tasked with promoting democratic participation and delivering essential public services. These responsibilities include the provision of water, electricity, housing, and infrastructure—critical components for addressing persistent inequalities and improving the quality of life for all citizens. However, despite this constitutional mandate, local government structures have often been undermined by hierarchical political relationships, institutional fragmentation, and systemic governance weaknesses. According to Britz (2025), the South African government's current strategy to improve service delivery hinges on overcoming fragmented priorities, misaligned budgets, and poor integration across the national, provincial, and local levels. The Medium-Term Development Plan (MTDP) 2024–2029 seeks to address these issues by fostering policy coherence, building institutional capacity, and combating corruption, thus aligning administrative actions with the transformative vision articulated in the National Development Plan (NDP).

South Africa's macro-development framework is deeply informed by an interlocking set of strategic initiatives, primarily the NDP, the MTDP, and various localised programmes. The NDP, with its horizon set for 2030, articulates a vision to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality through inclusive economic growth, job creation, and improved public sector performance. Importantly, the NDP does not advocate for entirely new policy paradigms, but rather focuses on strengthening the implementation of existing policy frameworks across national departments (Naidoo & Mare, 2015; Wyk, 2020). This approach necessitates coordinated effort among 40 national departments and alignment with 14 strategic outcomes as outlined in the Medium-Term Strategic Framework (MTSF). Moreover, the NDP seeks alignment with global development agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasising national ownership, interdepartmental collaboration, and political commitment (Fourie, 2018).

Functioning as a complementary mechanism to the NDP, the MTDP serves to translate long-term national objectives into measurable short- and medium-term actions. It is instrumental in ensuring that national development priorities are coherent with international commitments and are operationalised through localised governance structures (Fourie, 2018). Chapter 13 of the NDP is particularly pertinent, as it underscores the need to build a capable and developmental state. This includes promoting efficient governance, enhancing institutional capacity, and reinforcing accountability mechanisms across all levels

of government. Within this framework, local government plays a critical role in development planning and implementation, particularly through mechanisms such as Local Economic Development (LED) and Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) (Rogerson, 2000; Sowman & Brown, 2006; Stoffelen et al., 2020). These instruments are intended to bridge macro-level policies with localised interventions that empower marginalised communities and support sustainable development.

Post-apartheid reforms have significantly redefined the role of local government, aiming to decentralise authority and enhance community engagement in governance processes. As noted by Lyon (2015), the establishment of democratic local governance was pivotal in fostering participatory decision-making and institutional legitimacy. Despite these reforms, however, the capacity of municipalities to deliver on their developmental mandates remains uneven. Mustafa (2017) underscores the importance of functional municipalities in achieving macro-development goals, while Kgobe (2024) highlights how capacity deficits and limited resources at the local level undermine service delivery and impede national development outcomes. Furthermore, Hassan, Akintola, and Hassan (2024) demonstrate that disparities in institutional capability across municipalities necessitate targeted interventions and tailored capacity-building strategies aligned with national development priorities.

Equally important is the role of citizen participation in shaping service delivery outcomes. As Kgobe (2024) argues, inclusive and participatory governance enhances both the legitimacy and effectiveness of local government interventions. However, despite the proliferation of participatory frameworks, a significant implementation gap persists, particularly in aligning community needs with macro-developmental objectives. While Mamokhere (2022) offers valuable insights into the operational challenges facing municipalities, a persistent void remains in terms of integrated frameworks that effectively connect local governance with broader strategic visions.

The study investigates the evolving role of local government within South Africa's national development framework. It seeks to interrogate the underlying factors that constrain service delivery at the municipal level, including institutional weaknesses, fragmented coordination, stakeholder disengagement, and resource limitations. In doing so, the research aims to propose innovative and contextually relevant strategies for repositioning local government as an effective agent within the macro-development agenda. Ultimately, the study contributes to the discourse on developmental governance by offering a conceptual and practical roadmap for

enhancing service delivery in a manner that is responsive, equitable, and sustainable—thus reinforcing national development imperatives and contributing to improved socio-economic outcomes for all South Africans.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Efforts to theorise the role and purpose of local government have long been central to academic and policy debates, particularly in contexts where decentralisation and democratic consolidation intersect with developmental imperatives. The need to understand why local governments exist and what they are expected to achieve has given rise to various theoretical perspectives. As noted by Makine, Hassan, and Taiwo (2016), three principal schools of thought dominate the literature on local governance: the Democratic Participatory School, the Efficiency Services School, and the Development School. These frameworks offer differing yet complementary explanations for the function and strategic value of local government systems, especially within developing societies.

### Democratic Participatory School

The Democratic Participatory School conceptualises local government as a vehicle for democratic deepening and civic empowerment. It posits that decentralised governance fosters citizen engagement, political accountability, and responsiveness to community needs. Rooted in utilitarian philosophy, particularly the works of John Stuart Mill, this school asserts that *representative government* serves to balance liberty, equality, and collective welfare (Ola, 2007). Local government is thus considered a foundational layer of democracy, enabling citizens to participate more directly in governance and to elect accountable local representatives (John & Rupak, 2008). Scholars such as Horste (2005) and Nico (2008) argue that democratic values are most effectively nurtured at the local level, where governance is closer to the people and political institutions are more accessible.

This model is also valued for promoting inclusivity, especially for historically marginalised or underrepresented groups. As Chukwuemeka et al. (2014) observe, smaller governance units promote accountability by shortening the distance between citizens and decision-makers. Oviasuyi and Dada (2010) further reinforce this view, suggesting that participatory democracy finds its most meaningful expression within local political structures. However, while the school excels in highlighting the normative significance of local governance in sustaining

democratic culture, it offers limited tools for assessing service delivery performance or institutional efficiency.

### **Efficiency Services School**

In contrast, the Efficiency Services School emphasizes the instrumental and technical roles of local government. According to this perspective, the primary objective of local authorities is the efficient and effective provision of public services tailored to local needs (Ola, 2007). Advocates argue that local government exists not merely to promote democratic values, but to operationalise national policies and deliver essential services such as water, sanitation, electricity, and infrastructure in ways that reflect local priorities.

Kafle and Karkee (2003) contend that service delivery should be the central evaluative criterion of local government performance, rather than levels of citizen engagement. Furthermore, Kgobe (2024b) underscores that the proximity of local government to communities enables a more accurate assessment of local preferences, enhances policy sustainability, and improves the mobilisation of resources—both internally and from external stakeholders. This perspective is particularly relevant in contexts where institutional performance is constrained by fiscal and administrative limitations. Nonetheless, the efficiency-oriented model may overlook the democratic and developmental mandates of local governance, thereby presenting a more technocratic view that underplays the importance of participatory structures.

### **Development School**

The Development School of Thought views local government as a key instrument for promoting socio-economic transformation, particularly within ethnically diverse and historically unequal societies. This perspective highlights the capacity of local governance to facilitate grassroots development, foster political integration, and serve as a catalyst for local economic advancement (Ola, 2007). According to Adeyemo (2012), local governments are uniquely positioned to translate national development objectives into locally relevant programmes, thereby contributing to broader socio-economic progress.

Decentralisation is central to this school's logic, as it enables bottom-up innovation, enhances community ownership of development processes, and reduces the burden on central government structures (Ola, 1998; Nico, 2008). Saalah and Stanley (2011) reinforce this view by demonstrating that local governments, through their proximity to citizens, possess deeper insight into community-specific needs, thereby enabling more responsive and effective

interventions. The school further argues that local governance must be integrally linked to the provision of basic services—such as education, health care, and infrastructure—as these are foundational to national development (Adeyemo, 2011; Kgobe, 2024). Blair (1977) affirms that local governments are vital to the overall health of the governance system, functioning not merely as administrative units but as engines of transformation.

While each school of thought contributes to a richer understanding of local government, gaps remain in the literature—particularly regarding how these frameworks intersect and operate in practice within transitional and resource-constrained settings like South Africa. The Democratic Participatory School, while normatively compelling, often lacks empirical grounding in service delivery outcomes. The Efficiency Services School, on the other hand, may marginalise the role of public participation, whereas the Development School sometimes under-theorises the institutional capacities required for sustainable local transformation.

The study addresses these gaps by integrating insights from all three schools to develop a more holistic understanding of local governance. It examines how democratic engagement, service efficiency, and developmental objectives can be harmonised within South Africa's macro-development framework. These theoretical foundations are not applied in isolation but rather as analytical lenses through which to interpret empirical findings and propose contextually relevant policy recommendations. By doing so, the study contributes to an evolving discourse on the strategic repositioning of local government as both an agent of transformation and a frontline actor in public service provision.

## **METHOD**

This study adopts a qualitative research design, selected for its suitability in exploring complex social phenomena and institutional dynamics that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measures. The primary objective is to investigate the evolving role of local government within South Africa's macro-development agenda, with particular focus on governance structures, policy coherence, and service delivery outcomes. The qualitative approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of institutional contexts, policy interactions, and the socio-political dimensions of service delivery at the local level.

A conceptual analytical method is employed, which allows for a comprehensive examination of how local governance mechanisms function across different contexts. This method supports an interpretive inquiry into the

interrelationship between governance practices and national development objectives, making it possible to assess both the structural and operational dimensions of local government performance.

### **Data Collection and Sources**

Data were collected exclusively from secondary sources, chosen for their relevance, credibility, and breadth. These include government reports, white papers, policy documents, academic journal articles, and published evaluations of local governance and service delivery in South Africa. The selection of sources was guided by their alignment with the study's thematic focus and theoretical underpinnings. The use of secondary data allows the researcher to draw from a rich base of existing knowledge while avoiding the ethical and logistical complexities of primary data collection in public administration settings.

### **Data Analysis Technique**

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, a qualitative technique that involves systematically coding data and identifying recurring patterns, categories, and themes. This analytical method enables the researcher to uncover latent content within texts and to interpret how policy discourse, institutional design, and governance frameworks affect service delivery. Through the process of data familiarisation, open coding, and theme development, the study generates insights into governance challenges, policy gaps, and possible avenues for reform. The analysis is informed by three principal theoretical frameworks:

1. The Democratic Participatory School, which highlights the role of local government in facilitating citizen engagement, participatory governance, and downward accountability;
2. The Efficiency Services School, which views local government as a vehicle for effective, responsive, and resource-efficient service delivery;
3. The Development School, which positions local government as an agent of socio-economic transformation and sustainable development.

These theoretical perspectives serve not only as interpretive lenses but also provide the analytical scaffolding to position the findings within broader debates on state capacity and developmental governance.

### **Chronological Flow and Procedure**

The research process proceeded through the following phases:



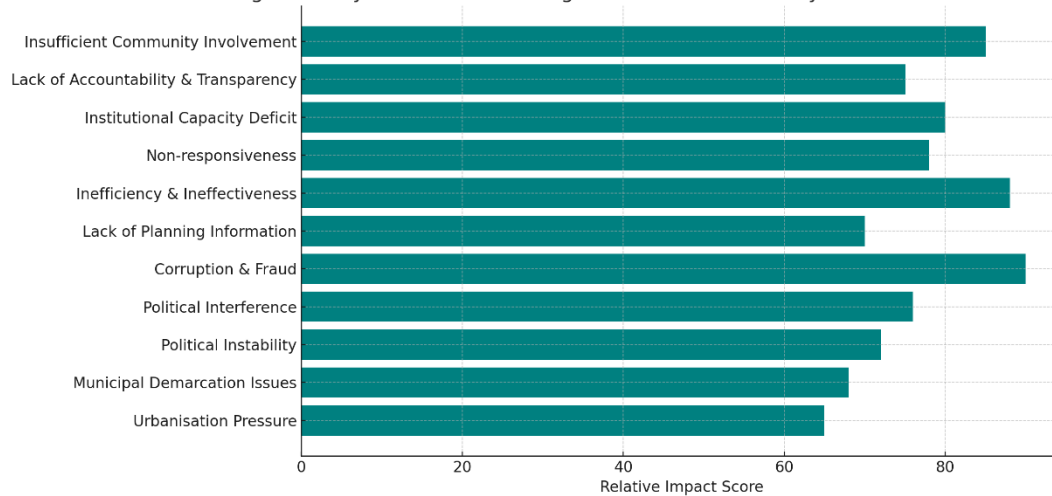
1. Problem Formulation and Conceptual Framing: Based on observed policy-performance discrepancies and theoretical gaps in the literature.
2. Data Acquisition: Systematic identification and selection of secondary data aligned with the study's conceptual model.
3. Analytical Processing: Application of thematic analysis through iterative reading, coding, and categorisation.
4. Interpretation and Theoretical Integration: Synthesising findings with the three aforementioned theoretical schools to contextualise the role of local government in macro-development strategies.

While no computational algorithms or pseudocode are applied—given the non-numeric nature of the data—the research employs an interpretive logic model to trace causal pathways between governance structures and service delivery outcomes.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**



Figure 1: Key Factors Contributing to Poor Service Delivery in South African Municipalities



### Evolution of Local Government Structures in South Africa

The transformation of local government in South Africa is rooted in a phased legislative and institutional reform process that began with the Local Government Transition Act of 1993 and culminated in the establishment of democratically structured municipalities in 2000 (Kanyane & Koma, 2006). The 1996 Constitution formalised local government as an autonomous sphere, distinct yet interdependent with provincial and national authorities, and assigned it the mandate of sustainable service delivery and participatory development (Mlambo & Maserumule, 2023). Critical legislative instruments such as the 1998 White Paper on Local Government and the Local Government Systems Act of 2000 provided a strategic and operational framework for developmental local governance.

Over time, this system evolved into 257 municipalities comprising metropolitan, district, and local categories, entrusted with delivering core services—water, electricity, sanitation, housing, and infrastructure (Madumo, 2015). However, despite these reforms, implementation has often skewed towards integrationist practices, where centralised political and fiscal dynamics limit local autonomy (Cameron, 2001). This has created a contradiction between the legal mandate of autonomy and the practical interdependence that defines many local governance outcomes in South Africa.

### The Role of Local Government in South Africa's Development Agenda

Local government is at the frontline of South Africa's development agenda, particularly through its engagement in Local Economic Development (LED) initiatives aimed at poverty alleviation, job creation, and socio-economic transformation (Khambule, 2018; Mashamaite & Lethoko, 2018). The developmental local government model, as outlined in post-apartheid policies, expands the responsibilities of municipalities beyond basic service provision to include facilitating inclusive growth and socio-economic rights (Rensburg & Naude, 2007).

However, this expanded mandate has not always been supported by adequate institutional capacity or resource availability. Studies by Mashamaite & Lethoko (2018) and Ngumbela (2023) identify insufficient funding, administrative inefficiencies, and weak community engagement as persistent constraints. The mismatch between responsibilities and capabilities has undermined the realisation of constitutional promises and contributed to escalating service delivery failures across many localities.

### **Interplay Between Local Governance and the National Development Agenda**

The interconnection between local governance and national development objectives is pivotal. Local governments act as the implementing arms of the National Development Plan (NDP), translating national strategies into community-level impact. This alignment is particularly important for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Fourie, 2018; Croese et al., 2021). Yet, fragmented governance structures, capacity deficits, and weak intergovernmental coordination often obstruct this alignment.

Research by Maela, Matloga, & Zitha (2024) points to a pressing need for multi-level governance frameworks that balance central oversight with local autonomy, ensuring that bottom-up realities inform top-down directives. While participatory governance has been institutionalised in policy, its operationalisation remains uneven—especially for marginalised populations (Kgobe, Bayat & Karriem, 2024).

### **Factors Contributing to Poor Service Delivery**

As summarised in **Figure 1**, the study identifies multiple interrelated governance and structural barriers to effective service delivery, drawn from extensive secondary literature analysis.

Key Factors:

1. Corruption and Fraud (90/100): The most cited factor, where misallocation of public resources undermines service delivery systems (Mabeba, 2021; Mashilo & Kgobe, 2021).
2. Inefficiency and Ineffectiveness (88/100): Institutional inefficiency, exacerbated by inadequate infrastructure and resource mismanagement (Wadesango et al., 2018).
3. Community Non-involvement (85/100): A lack of genuine citizen engagement has led to service delivery protests and declining accountability (Mamokhere, 2022).
4. Institutional Capacity Deficit (80/100): Critical shortages of skills and poor management hinder municipal effectiveness (Kgobe, 2024b; Mamokhere, 2022).
5. Accountability and Transparency Deficits (75/100): These erode trust and governance credibility (Thusi & Selepe, 2023).
6. Urbanisation Pressure and Demarcation Conflicts: Further strain resources, infrastructure, and local planning (Mamokhere, 2022; Mthiyane et al., 2022).

These systemic issues have cumulatively contributed to financial strain, with 28% of municipalities in financial distress and millions in unspent infrastructure grants returned to the National Treasury (Auditor General of South Africa, 2021).

### **Strategies to Enhance Local Service Delivery**

#### ***Revision of the 1998 White Paper***

The proposed update to the White Paper on Local Government is a critical intervention aimed at recalibrating the policy landscape. It seeks to address entrenched challenges such as institutional rigidity, misaligned mandates, and weak financial governance (Britz, 2025). A renewed emphasis on fiscal sustainability, capacity-building, and citizen participation is expected to make municipalities more accountable and responsive.

#### ***Integrated Development Planning (IDP)***

While IDPs offer a platform for strategic alignment, their success is often compromised by poor community participation and planning capacity (Kgobe et al., 2023; Mathebula et al., 2016). Strengthening public engagement and multi-stakeholder collaboration is essential to improving their functionality.

***Local Economic Development (LED)***

LED initiatives have potential for transforming local economies and improving livelihoods, especially in rural areas. However, their impact is limited by insufficient innovation, weak inter-sectoral coordination, and lack of policy coherence (Meena, 2023; Rogerson, 2010).

***District Development Model (DDM)***

The DDM aims to enhance coordination and address spatial inequalities by promoting district-based planning. Yet, its success hinges on overcoming legacy spatial divisions and investing in district-level institutional capacity (Academy of Science of South Africa, 2022; Mamokhere & Kgobe, 2023).

The findings of this study indicate that while South Africa has developed a sophisticated policy and constitutional framework for local governance, its implementation is hindered by systemic weaknesses—including limited capacity, corruption, and fragmented intergovernmental relations. The integration of theoretical perspectives from the Democratic Participatory, Efficiency Services, and Development Schools reveals that no single model can independently address the complexity of local governance challenges. Therefore, a hybrid approach that incorporates accountability, service efficiency, and inclusive development is essential for realising the transformative vision of South Africa's National Development Plan.

**CONCLUSION**

This study set out to examine the evolving role of local government within South Africa's macro-development framework, as introduced in the *Introduction*. It aimed to explore how governance structures, institutional capacity, and service delivery mechanisms interact with national development goals. The findings presented in the *Results and Discussion* affirm that the expectations outlined at the outset have been substantiated through critical thematic analysis. Local governments are revealed to be central to South Africa's developmental ambitions, yet they remain significantly constrained by systemic inefficiencies, inadequate institutional capacity, governance fragmentation, and endemic corruption.

Using a qualitative, document-based methodology, this research identifies key structural and operational deficiencies that undermine effective service delivery. These challenges persist despite a robust legal and policy framework anchored in the 1996 Constitution and further elaborated through strategic instruments such

as the National Development Plan, the Integrated Development Plan, and the District Development Model. The study supports the view that these instruments—while conceptually sound—require urgent recalibration and practical implementation support to address real-world governance shortcomings. In this regard, the proposed revision of the 1998 White Paper on Local Government, as announced by President Cyril Ramaphosa, presents a critical policy window to reimagine and revitalise local governance in South Africa.

The study acknowledges several limitations. The reliance on secondary data—primarily policy documents and academic literature—limits direct engagement with real-time, on-the-ground governance dynamics. Additionally, the exclusive focus on South Africa may affect the generalisability of the findings to other governance systems, while the static nature of document analysis may not fully account for rapidly changing local governance conditions in response to socio-economic shocks or policy shifts.

Looking ahead, future research should focus on empirical assessments of local governance performance following the implementation of revised policy frameworks. Comparative cross-national studies could offer valuable insights into how other jurisdictions address similar challenges, while participatory governance studies may explore the impact of citizen engagement on service delivery outcomes. Further exploration of the institutional dynamics between local, provincial, and national spheres would also enhance understanding of multi-level governance effectiveness.

Based on the findings, this study proposes the following key recommendations to enhance service delivery and governance performance at the local level:

1. **Revise and Implement the 1998 White Paper on Local Government**

The revision process must address systemic inefficiencies, including fragmented institutional mandates, weak fiscal accountability, and inadequate human resource capacity. Emphasis should be placed on creating a more responsive, transparent, and citizen-oriented governance model.

2. **Strengthen Integrated Development Planning (IDP)**

IDPs should be reinforced as functional, participatory instruments that align municipal objectives with community needs. Greater emphasis must be placed on inclusive planning, improved budget coherence, and monitoring mechanisms to ensure alignment with broader developmental goals.

### 3. Reposition Local Economic Development (LED)

LED initiatives should be infused with social innovation and designed to promote inclusive economic participation. A greater focus on supporting local enterprise development, rural economic diversification, and strategic partnerships across sectors is critical for long-term sustainability.

### 4. Operationalise the District Development Model (DDM)

The DDM offers potential for integrated service delivery across government departments, but implementation must be guided by contextual responsiveness, effective intergovernmental coordination, and capacity-building at the district level. Special attention must be paid to addressing historical socio-spatial disparities.

In conclusion, this study contributes both theoretically and practically to the field of local governance by integrating the Democratic Participatory, Efficiency Services, and Developmental schools of thought. It offers a multi-dimensional perspective on the governance-service delivery nexus and provides actionable insights for policy reform. By articulating systemic weaknesses and advancing targeted recommendations, the research supports efforts to construct a more capable, accountable, and developmentally aligned local government system—one that is indispensable for achieving South Africa's long-term socio-economic transformation.

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