





The role of district municipalities in service provision in South Africa: Dissecting challenges faced by Ehlanzeni District Municipality



Authors:

Douglas N. Magagula¹ 
 Ricky M. Mukonza¹ 
 Rasodi K. Manyaka² 
 Kabelo Moeti¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Public Affairs, Faculty of Humanities, Tshwane University of Technology, Polokwane, South Africa

²Department of Public Administration and Management, Faculty of Humanities, University of Mpumalanga, Mbombela, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Douglas Magagula,
 magaguladn@mpg.gov.za

Dates:

Received: 12 Jan. 2022
 Accepted: 06 May 2022
 Published: 28 July 2022

How to cite this article:

Magagula, D.N., Mukonza R.M., Manyaka, R.K. & Moeti K., 2022, 'The role of district municipalities in service provision in South Africa: Dissecting challenges faced by Ehlanzeni District Municipality', *Africa's Public Service Delivery and Performance Review* 10(1), a628. <https://doi.org/10.4102/apsdpr.v10i1.628>

Copyright:

© 2022. The Authors.
 Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Background: District municipalities are faced with numerous challenges that hinder their ability to execute the legal mandate of assisting local municipalities to deliver services to their communities.

Aim: This article explored two critical issues: political challenges faced by districts in the recruitment of personnel in key positions and the financial status of districts in relation to their role in local government.

Setting: The study is based in the Ehlanzeni District Municipality, Mpumalanga Province. The study also included local municipalities within Ehlanzeni District (City of Mbombela, Nkomazi and Bushbuckridge local municipalities); South African Local Government Association; and the Mpumalanga Department of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs.

Methods: The study adopted a qualitative research method, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews.

Results: Literature and the study findings revealed that cadre deployment in key positions has contributed to the shortage of skilled personnel in municipalities. The findings also showed that Ehlanzeni District Municipality is not adequately financed to be able to execute its legal mandate.

Conclusion: The study recommended that cadre deployment in key municipal positions should be aligned with legislated recruitment policies. Moreover, communities need to start paying for services that they receive so that municipalities may have more revenue to maintain infrastructure, to ensure continued service delivery.

Keywords: local government; service delivery; Ehlanzeni District Municipality; revenue base; cadre deployment.

Introduction and background

The role of district municipalities in improving service delivery in local municipalities is crucial and exerts a powerful influence on the sphere of local government, as well as the local municipalities under their jurisdiction. The political landscape of South African municipalities has been found to be contaminated by several factors, which include, to mention a few, nepotism and the 'mushrooming of fly-by-night politicians', which impacts negatively on the proper functioning of municipalities because of poor implementation of good governance policies (Masegare & Ngoepe 2018; Ngcamu 2013). Reddy (2016) pointed out that recruitment processes in the district and local municipalities are flouted by politicians who want to hire people who will serve their interests, which is detrimental to the smooth functioning of the sphere of local government as certain expertise is required to run municipalities. The functioning and performance of municipalities, according to the 2009 state of local government assessment, have been affected by conflict of interests and factionalism within political parties. In addition, the subsequent formation of political coalitions and elites has also influenced municipal functionality that engulfed citizenry dissatisfaction on service delivery issues (Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs [COGTA] 2009; Masiya, Davids & Mangai 2019).

South African municipalities in the rural areas highly depend on grants from the national and provincial governments and remain in a poor financial position because of their poor financial management (Kanyane 2011). This suggests that the district municipality should be able to

enhance the capacity of its local municipalities in terms of skills, resources and other means, which will enable the local sphere to adhere to the principles of the *Municipal Finance Management Act, 2003* (MFMA) and relevant legislation to ensure sound financial management in municipalities (Republic of South Africa 2003). Whelan (2004) and Magagula (2018) argued that the revenue base for district municipalities is limited compared to one of the local municipalities, as most of the revenue for districts is coming from the national equitable share and other national grants. The specific objectives of the article are to investigate political challenges faced by district municipalities in the recruitment of personnel in key positions and the financial status of district municipalities in relation to their role of improving service delivery in local municipalities. The next section of this article reviews the literature regarding the extent to which political involvement in the recruitment of personnel in key positions affects district municipalities in assisting local municipalities to ensure that they can deliver services and also to review the impact of financial challenges faced by district municipalities in local government.

Ehlanzeni District Municipality overview

Ehlanzeni District is bordered by Eswatini and Mozambique in the east, Nkangala District in the west, Gert Sibande District in the south, and Sekhukhune and Mopani Districts of Limpopo Province in the north (Ehlanzeni District Municipality 2016). The offices of Ehlanzeni District Municipality are situated in Mbombela (formerly known as Nelspruit). This District Municipality comprises four local municipalities, namely Nkomazi, Thaba Chweu, City of Mbombela and Bushbuckridge Local Municipality. This District Municipality has a population of 1 754 931 (STATSA 2016) and is predominantly 70% rural (Ehlanzeni District Municipality 2016). The district has three border posts to Mozambique and Eswatini (Mananga, Lebombo and Matsamo border gates), and the movement of people from these countries to Ehlanzeni, and from Gauteng to Mozambique or Eswatini, is important for the economic life of the district (Ehlanzeni District Municipality 2017).

Some theoretical and contextual issues on local government

Kersting et al. (2009) cited that municipalities are established to strengthen democracy through the provision of services responsive to the needs and conditions of local communities.

Local government from a global context

In the unitary state of Poland, municipalities are classified into urban municipalities, rural municipalities and mixed municipalities. These municipalities form sub-municipal units with a secondary administrative role whose tasks and laws are defined by each municipality (Organisation for Economic, Co-operation and Development 2016). The Organisation for Economic, Co-operation and Development cited that municipalities deal with spatial planning, infrastructure development including environmental

protection, basic healthcare, public transport, bridges and local roads, utilities (waste management, sewerage, energy and water supply), social services (including family benefits), municipal housing, preschool and primary school education, recreation and culture. Kandula (2017) posited that municipalities, including rural municipalities, can generate their own revenue, but their capacities vary; the urban municipalities are able to generate revenue that is hundred times more than the lowest revenue in rural municipalities. Moreover, Radzik-Maruszak (2016) asserted that municipalities in Poland are well resourced with a strong financial base and remain the only local governmental institutions to collect their own taxes. Poland uses the unitary system of government, and the Municipal Council and the Mayor are elected directly by voters. Furthermore, political power is shared by the Municipal Council and the Mayor of a municipality; this impacts service delivery as the daily functioning of municipal government is affected by the political tensions of political office bearers (Radzik-Maruszak 2016).

Agu and Okeke (2016) posited that political actors in most African countries, such as Tanzania and Zimbabwe, do not prioritise municipalities, and this marginalisation of local government in the democratic process is prevalent in Nigeria where the local authority only serves the interest of state government. Functions of municipalities are to provide public goods and services including, but not limited to, road construction and maintenance within the towns of each district, including streetlights, sidewalks and drainage systems and water reservoirs construction across towns and villages (Majekodunmi 2012). They are also responsible for the construction and management of primary schools (Majekodunmi 2012). Akinola (2004) cited that public resources meant to benefit Nigerian communities tend to benefit political leaders at municipal levels and that the elites who run the municipal government are alienated from the culture of the people. Majekodunmi stated that municipal services in Nigeria are neither efficient nor effective and fail to meet the needs of communities on time, relying on a federal system of government.

With effect to the establishment of district and local municipalities, countries such as Nigeria and Canada use the federal system of government, with Canada having demonstrated good governance on local government matters (Swift 2012), whilst Nigeria is weak and struggling with the role of district municipalities being vaguely defined (Agu & Okeke 2016). This lack of clearly enunciated definitions necessitates extensive research to respond to challenges faced by failing local municipalities and to expound the contribution of district municipalities in the functioning of local municipalities, so that the service delivery goal of local government can be realised.

A South African context

The whole territory of South Africa is divided into municipalities, and these municipalities are all within the

sphere of local government. Section 151 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (the Constitution) provides municipalities with legislative and executive authority to run their businesses and to ensure that provincial or national government does not interfere with local government affairs. The Local Government: Municipal Structures Act, 1998 (the *Structures Act*), prescribes for the division of municipalities into three categories, namely the metropolitan (Category A municipality), district (Category C municipality) and the local municipality (Category B municipality) (Republic of South Africa 1998). In terms of Section 155(1) of the Constitution (Republic of South Africa 1996), a metropolitan municipality has exclusive municipal executive and legislative authority in its jurisdiction. On the contrary, a district municipality has municipal executive and legislative authority in an area that includes more than one municipality, and a local municipality shares municipal executive and legislative authority in its area with a district municipality within whose area it falls. Van der Waldt (2014) posited that metropolitan municipalities are generally seen to be in a better position with improved infrastructure and a substantial tax basis, and they have more staff members than the district and local municipalities. The formation of local and district municipalities has seemingly resulted from the fact that certain services are better provided on a larger scale because of economies of scale, and such services could be assigned to district municipalities in the unitary state of South Africa (Vennekens & Govender 2005). Vennekens and Govender argued that improved coordination of planning and redistribution of functions between a district and its local municipalities can be achieved at the district level. The shortage of resources continues to affect the district and local municipalities that are serving largely rural communities and the revenue sharing model of local government needs to consider such challenges (Mubangizi 2020). Even though municipalities are globally considered to be key in community development and poverty alleviation, poor service provision and incompetence of local government practitioners have been noted in the case of South Africa (Kalonda & Govender 2021). Kalonda and Govender added that poor service provision has frustrated local communities leading to unrest and the destruction of properties. Masiya et al. (2019) located these community unrests within 'uneven access to basic services' and the unfulfilled promises by political actors from the ruling party in that municipal demarcation. Programmes, plans and actions of the district municipality can be responsive if they are aligned with the plans and programmes of local municipalities (Magagula et al. 2019). In theory, it appears that district municipalities are unable to support local municipalities to ensure effective and efficient service provision to communities. Failure by district municipalities to support their locals, as noted by scholarly literature, poses a need to investigate the legal framework that governs the local government sphere in an attempt to establish if there are shortcomings and what could be suggested to address such limitations.

Legal mandate of district municipalities

The Constitution makes provision for the establishment of structures that will investigate the functioning of municipalities, and it further strengthens the authority of these municipalities by outlining powers and functions needed to fulfil local government mandates. The legislation that provides for an appropriate division of powers and functions between the district and local municipalities is clearly discussed below.

Local government: Municipal Structures Act, 1998 (Act 117 of 1998)

Municipalities are established in line with the provisions of the *Structures Act*, which further strengthens the relationship between the district and its local municipalities through cooperation and support of one another. Section 83 of the *Structures Act* gives rise to municipalities through separation of powers and functions between the district and local municipalities in the following way: a district municipality needs to ensure an integrated district planning that covers the whole district area. This planning should enhance the sustainability of service provision and socio-economic development across the district. The development of bulk infrastructure is also a function of the district; it must ensure that resources are distributed in an equitable manner between the local municipalities so that services may be rendered at appropriate levels. Where capacity is lacking, the district should assist its local municipalities through capacity building so that they may be able to perform and exercise their powers. Local municipalities appoint councillors to represent them in the district council, and this is done in terms of Section 23 of the *Structures Act*. These councillors seek to ensure that planning and programmes of the district and local municipality are synchronised and to bring critical issues affecting the local municipality to the attention of the district. The Member of the Executive Council for the Department of COGTA has in terms of Section 88(3) of the *Structures Act* to assist the district so that it may be able to provide support services to struggling local municipalities.

Local government: Municipal Finance Management Act, 2003 (Act 56 of 2003)

The MFMA, 2003, took into effect in 2004 and was formulated in accordance with the Constitution. The MFMA has been aligned with other local government legislations to form an intelligible package to enhance financial management practices and municipal financial accounting, to streamline budget and to position the finances of local government on a sustainable footing so that the capacity of municipalities in delivering services to communities may be maximised (National Treasury of South Africa 2011). The municipal council in a municipality bears the responsibility to approve the municipal annual budget, and it should be done within 30 days before the start of the financial year; the approved budget should be submitted to the national and provincial treasury by the accounting officer of the municipality. The MFMA, Circular 32 of 2006, made provisions for the establishment of the Municipal Public Accounts Committee

that seeks to strengthen the role of the municipal council towards ensuring accountability of the executive and the municipal administration and to ensure that municipal resources are optimally utilised (Van Niekerk & Dalton-Brits 2016). For the district municipality to live up to the constitutional and legislative mandates in respect of its roles and responsibilities in local government, adequate human and financial resources are needed (Kanyane 2011).

Political and financial challenges in district municipalities

Impact of political involvement in recruitment

Ngcamu (2013) averred that most municipal personnel are allegedly politically deployed without following the recruitment and selection policies and procedures. On the contrary, Masegare and Ngoepe (2018) articulated it as poor succession planning and abrupt changes in municipal leadership. Ajam (2012) posited that there are serious challenges in municipal service delivery resulting from a shortage of scarce and critical skills such as technical competence, and this corroborates with Kalonda and Govender (2021)'s finding that the lack of qualified personnel contributes to the inadequate water provision and the poor road infrastructure maintenance. Gqamane and Taylor (2013) noted an administrative incompetence in municipalities, particularly in key components such as finance, technical services and at the management level. This is assumed to be caused by the decline of professionals in municipalities and the poor linkages between the tertiary education sector and local government (Gqamane & Taylor 2013). According to Van Niekerk and Dalton-Brits (2016), political leadership fails to show interest in demonstrating effective leadership to guide and direct performance management and development, and this is confirmed by the 2013 report on Audit Outcomes on Local Government. Johnston and Bernstein (2007) asserted that skilled professionals are not considered for employment in municipalities if they are not affiliated to political parties that captured civil service jobs for patronage, which is confirmed by Kalonda and Govender (2021) who stated that the same unskilled staff 'lack awareness of local governance to serve the public'. Laubscher (2012) professed with Kalonda and Govender (2021) that the appointment of experts at the local government level would have a positive impact but the tendency to appoint individuals who are politically connected contributes negatively to the expertise required in municipalities. Poor recruitment practices are exercised by human resources systems, mostly to benefit political deployment, and municipalities struggle to attract and retain technically skilled personnel (Draai & Oshoniyi 2013).

Financial challenges faced by district municipalities

According to Van der Mescht and Van Jaarsveld (2012), most rural municipalities depend on government grants to remain solvent. It is critical to reflect that political office bearers have the utmost control on the way public funds are utilised in municipalities and subsequently influence the administration towards the allocation of funds to various functions. Matsiliza (2012) contended that municipalities, especially

rural municipalities, do not have adequate financial base and autonomy because of an unfair budgeting process that is dominated by political interference, as participatory budgeting is placed at the mayor's office, and the very office could apply an illegitimate and unjust exercise of power. On the contrary, The Presidency (2009) revealed that many local municipalities are faced with budget underspending, whilst there are no services rendered to communities; according to Masegare and Ngoepe (2018), the underspending is caused by maladministration. This has been found to be caused by a lack of capacity by the municipalities to deliver services, whereas district municipalities are there to assist these local municipalities to improve the way services are delivered. Whelan (2004) and Magagula (2018) argued that the revenue base for district municipalities is limited compared to one of the local municipalities, as most of the revenue for districts is coming from the national equitable share and other national grants. Modisha and Mtapuri (2013) added that national transfers and equitable shares are the main sources of revenue for most rural-based municipalities to enable these municipalities to execute their constitutional mandates as they have little capacity to raise own revenue, as most citizens reside in traditional houses where they do not pay rates and other service fees. These findings reveal that a district municipality cannot provide equal support to local municipalities as their needs have proven to vary from the capacity of the local municipality to the resources needed to perform their constitutional mandates; rural municipalities need much attention as compared to urban municipalities.

Drawing from the reviewed literature on challenges in municipalities, South Africa and Poland are both unitary states, but South African district municipalities do not have enough revenue base, whilst both rural and urban municipalities in Poland are able to generate their own revenue. National Treasury has made budget cuts to most government institutions because of the loss of fiscal sustainability resulting from COVID-19, which has left the government with limited resources to finance the ageing infrastructure and other economic growth activities (Burger & Calitz 2021). Matsiliza (2012) cited political interference as one of the challenges faced by South African municipalities in managing their financial affairs, whereas Mathebula (2014) averred that mismanagement of municipal revenue is the main cause for South African municipalities to remain poor and continuously fail to manage their finances in a sustainable manner. In Nigeria, political leaders who run municipalities are greedy, and they are the predators of public resources that are meant to benefit all people (Abegunde 2019; Akinola 2004). Van Niekerk and Dalton-Brits (2016) stated that political leaders in South Africa are not fully effective in embracing the responsibility to guide and direct the development and performance of municipalities. There is a need to educate political leaders on their roles and responsibilities and understand the overall functioning of the local sphere of government (Magagula 2018). The next section discusses the methodology adopted to guide the systematic process of this article.

Research methods and design

This article discusses two critical issues: political challenges faced by district municipalities in the recruitment of personnel in key positions and the financial status of district municipalities in relation to their role of improving service delivery in local municipalities. A qualitative research approach was utilised in gathering data. As asserted by Atieno (2009), a qualitative study is a proper response to some, but not all, research needs. The qualitative approach has been chosen because of its ability to organise, systematically collect, describe and interpret data that include visual, verbal or textual data, and it can also be evaluated (Hammarberg, Kirkman & De Lacey 2016). Qualitative methods are used to uncover a broader understanding on how evidence-based practice may be implemented, to provide reasons for failure or success during such implementation; it further identifies strategies and measures on how to facilitate implementation (Palinkas et al. 2016). The researchers have chosen the following institutions for the study:

- Ehlanzeni District Municipality
- Nkomazi, City of Mbombela and Bushbuckridge Local Municipality (these local municipalities fall under Ehlanzeni District)
- Mpumalanga COGTA
- South African Local Government Association (SALGA)

In this research study, the top management officials and the political office bearers of Ehlanzeni District Municipality formed the population; it also included the top management officials and the political office bearers of the local municipalities within Ehlanzeni District Municipality; a representative from COGTA (responsible for municipal cluster) and the top management official from SALGA also formed part of the population. The study comprised 26 respondents from all the mentioned institutions. The rationale behind the selection is that top management officials and the political office bearers are the only group of officials who could have the information required for the study (Groen, Simmons & McNair 2017). It should be noted, however, that Thaba Chweu Local Municipality could not form part of this study because of work commitments and other reasons. The study adopted purposive sampling. This is a part of non-probability sampling, and participants were selected on the basis of the researchers' judgement. Purposive sampling is a method that an informant chooses because of the ability that the informant possesses (Tongco 2007). Tongco warned that using purposive sampling may cause ambiguity because the researcher exercises judgement based on the informant's competency and reliability. The reason for using purposive sampling was that the top management officials and the political office bearers are the only group of officials who could have the information required for the study. This is because they are the officials responsible for overseeing the overall functioning of local government.

Data collection methods

Sutton and Austin (2015) asserted that any method of data collection that is adopted in a study will result in generating a large amount of data. Before the data were collected, a written permission was sought and granted by the Municipal Manager of Ehlanzeni District Municipality for the research study to commence. Written permissions to extend the study to the four local municipalities were sought, and three of the four local municipalities permitted the researchers to carry out the research project, namely Nkomazi, City of Mbombela and Bushbuckridge Local Municipality. Institutions such as Mpumalanga COGTA and SALGA were also participants in the study, and they gave permission through a telephonic conversation and an email, respectively. Semi-structured interviews were used as the research method by the researcher, and they are explained below.

Interviews

An interview is a conversation that is extendable amongst partners, and it is aimed at having an 'in-depth information' on a particular topic or subject, through which phenomena could be construed according to the meanings that are presented by respondents (Groen et al. 2017; Schostak 2005). Schostak added that an interview is not an easy tool that can be used to find information, and it is essentially a platform where views may clash, differ or enchant. This study was conducted with the use of semi-structured interviews in order to yield open-ended answers as Stuckey (2013) averred that participants are presented with the prospect of replying in their own words instead of compelling them to choose answers from fixed responses. It can be regarded as a much flexible form of a structured interview because 'it allows depth to be achieved by providing the opportunity on the part of the interviewer to probe and expand the responses of the respondent' (Rubin & Rubin 2011). Stuckey added that in a semi-structured interview, responses by the respondent guide the direction of the interview, but the outline for the discussions covered is set out by the researcher.

Data analysis techniques

Edwards and Holland (2013) conceded that there is no fixed method of data analysis, but to protect the validity and reliability of the research project and the quality of the interview, researchers need to be careful when selecting the data analysis method. Vosloo (2014) opined that in a qualitative data analysis, it is often that the researcher 'not only wishes to highlight recurring features but also different steps, procedures and processes that are at the disposal' of the researcher. After the entire process of collecting data had been concluded, the researcher had to consult the notes that were written to ensure that the data corroborate to the one on the audio recordings taken during the interview; the recordings were played multiple times to validate the accuracy of the information captured, and texts were created for analysis. Classification of results was in line with the questions asked, and the remarks were made according to the outcomes provided during the study process. The data

collected were analysed with the use of Thematic Content Analysis, which is a foundational methodical procedure when analysing a qualitative data. Thematic Content Analysis is mainly used for a descriptive study, and it helps to group a 'list of common themes' from notes and other texts created for the classification of results (Anderson 2007).

Ethical considerations

Edwards and Holland (2013) cited that there should not be any stage of the interview process that will overlook ethical issues, and study participants should only participate in an interview once they have granted their informed consent. Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Tshwane University of Technology Faculty Committee for Research Ethics (FCRE-HUM) (reference number: FCRE/PM/STD/2017/08). Before data were collected, sessions were held to brief the potential participants and to clarify the purpose of the research study. These sessions were held through face-to-face meetings at the participants' offices, through e-mails where participants could not be available for meetings and with the use of phone calls as Hammarberg et al. (2016) cited that the purpose of the research should be made transparent and explicit. The data were collected prior to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Lists of semi-structured questions were forwarded to all study participants for them to be familiar with the questions, which has helped in saving time during the interview sessions. Edwards and Holland posited that an 'ethical challenge to researchers would be openness and intimacy of the interview situation as it may lead respondents to disclose information that they may regret' at a later stage. Study findings will be presented in the following section.

Results and discussion

The article sought to examine two critical issues on the challenges of district municipalities in supporting local municipalities, namely, district municipalities' political involvement in the recruitment of personnel in key positions and the financial status of district municipalities in relation to their role of assisting local municipalities. The article further sought to proffer recommendations on how to further improve the way district municipalities provide support for local municipalities. The study was conducted at Ehlanzeni District Municipality, covering three of the four local municipalities within the district (Nkomazi, City of Mbombela and Bushbuckridge Local Municipalities), with the purpose of assessing whether district municipalities are living up to their constitutional and legislative mandates in assisting to improve service delivery in local municipalities. The study has therefore uncovered findings that are presented below.

The challenge of political involvement in recruitment

It was said that there are political challenges that impact on the way the district municipality provides support to local municipalities. A key informant from the City of Mbombela Local Municipality stated that:

'The district municipality does not have enough technically qualified personnel; they have very few people with expertise in the fields of finance, electrical, civil and chemical engineering and those few are not assisting us....' (51 years old, male, General Manager)

On the contrary, another respondent from the City of Mbombela Local Municipality conceded that in 2017, the district municipality deployed its Chief Financial Officer to assist the local municipality with its financial affairs. Political factions within the ruling party have been found to be negatively affecting the functioning of municipal councils, in that political office bearers align themselves in different groups with ulterior motives of cadre deployment and sabotage one another, which bears a negative impact on the effectiveness of the district municipality. These political factions lead to poor coordination of functions and negatively affect the employment of officials in district municipalities (Magagula et al. 2019). The key informant from COGTA pointed:

'It should not only be about the district being unable to assist local municipalities, since certain local municipalities do not observe the authority of Ehlanzeni District Municipality, they would remind us in important meetings that they have their own executive, so they need the district to give them space to conduct their own planning and execution of functions.' (47 years old, male, Director)

In the light of cadre deployment, the challenge of hiring unskilled personnel is encountered by both the district and the local municipalities, which corroborates with Palmer's (2011) finding that district municipalities lack personnel with project management skills, whilst Laubscher (2012) highlighted that the tendency to appoint individuals who are politically connected contributes negatively to the expertise required in municipalities. Without employees with this expertise, organisations and municipalities will struggle in planning, organising, coordinating and managing the budgeting processes and reporting, resulting in failure to achieve organisational tasks and mandates (Nyawo & Mubangizi 2021). Twala (2014) asserted that the African National Congress (which is the national ruling party, Mpumalanga provincial ruling party and the ruling party of Ehlanzeni district) felt that an alternative to neutralise the threat of sabotaging government by opposition parties was to appoint loyal members of the ruling party who could, at least, be trusted politically. Political factions where political office bearers form groups to rally against each other have been discovered to be a challenge, because they affect budget votes and other proceedings that bear a negative impact on the district municipality and the local municipalities, which supports the views of COGTA (2009) and Kalonda and Govender (2021) that factionalism within political parties has hindered functionality and performance of municipalities. A key respondent from Nkomazi Local Municipality stated:

'Municipal Councils tend to submit a list containing names of people to be deployed, in particular after local government elections, but the challenge is that some of them are placed at key positions such as infrastructure development, finance and supply chain management without having any relevant

academic qualifications on such fields.’ (41 years old, female, member of Municipal Council)

One respondent from Bushbuckridge Local Municipality said:

‘[W]e can blame the district municipality for not doing enough in terms of assisting us as locals, but the main challenge is that they are short of professionals just like we are, our politicians (in both the district and local municipalities) recruit high school teachers (for example) to become Chief Financial Officers and some to become managers in critical departments such as Water and Sanitation.’ (53 years old, male, Manager)

The challenge of financial affairs

The funding model of the district municipality has also been pointed out as posing a thoughtful challenge regarding the effectiveness of the district municipality in aiding local municipalities. Given the limited resources at the district municipality, it was found that the local councils only care about their respective local municipalities even when the priority should be given to the severely affected and poor, local municipalities. A key informant from COGTA stated that:

‘[T]he district municipality does not have money and it does not generate sufficient revenue. How can the district successfully operate as an institution if it continues to be dependent on few little grants from national government?’ (57 years old, male, Deputy Director)

This corresponds with Whelan (2004) and Magagula (2018) who stated that the revenue base for district municipalities is limited compared to one of the local municipalities. It was understood that the district municipality receives a relatively low budget to execute its functions. Mubangizi (2020) opined that an increase in revenue for rural municipalities should be considered so that they may improve their resources. A key respondent from Ehlanzeni District Municipality (55 years old, male, General Manager) stated that ‘most of the grants that the district municipality used to receive, such as water infrastructure grant, were withdrawn from the district and channelled to local municipalities’. Another informant from Ehlanzeni District Municipality stated that:

‘[T]here are a number of residents from existing townships that do not entirely pay for services, such as Matsulu and Kanyamazane in the City of Mbombela Local Municipality, Dwarssloop and Thulamahashe in Bushbuckridge Local Municipality and Kamhlushwa in Nkomazi Local Municipality. They should pay for services.’ (38 years old, female, Principal Environmental Officer)

Two of the participants from Bushbuckridge Local Municipality supported this view.

Conclusion

The article sought to examine the challenges faced by district municipalities in providing support for its local municipalities, and it has uncovered the challenges of political involvement in the recruitment of key positions and financial shortages in the district municipality. It appears in recent literature and the findings of this study that district municipalities are

failing to provide the necessary support to local municipalities to ensure effective and efficient service provision to the communities that they serve, and the legislation is ambiguous on certain issues that affect the functioning of the local sphere of government. This includes the challenge of cadre deployment and the funding model of the district municipality. A cadre who is appointed in a particular key municipal position should meet the required level of knowledge, skill, experience and qualifications as prescribed in the recruitment policies and legislation of local government. It is also recommended that interviews in municipal key positions should be observed by independent bodies such as COGTA and SALGA in order to ensure that the right candidate for a particular position is appointed. Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs and SALGA become independent because they do not account for the same Municipal Council that contributes to skills shortages by bringing people without relevant academic qualifications, as indicated by some of the respondents. The provisions of Section 158 of the Constitution, read with Section 21 of the *Structures Act*, should also prescribe a minimum academic qualification for members of a Municipal Council so that they may see the need to deploy qualified people in key positions.

The national government should review the budget of district municipalities; there should be consultation on those reviews so that there may be clarity on where funds may be solicited. It should be noted, however, that the effects of COVID-19 have affected all sectors of the economy, including all levels of government. Sector departments should assist the district municipality in engaging with the national government regarding the increase in budget allocation. It seems that the funding model of municipalities, in particular rural municipalities, will remain inadequate, because improved service delivery requires, amongst other things, maintenance of infrastructure so that services may be delivered on a sustainable basis. Local communities need to pay for services that they receive so that municipalities may be able to generate revenue for serving the same communities, but there should be a determination on who should pay so that unemployed people who do not receive any income are exempted from paying for such services. There is also a need for the district municipality, in association with the provincial government, to assist local municipalities in establishing townships so that residents could pay for services that they receive, and in that way, the financial situation of municipalities could improve significantly. Moreover, the district municipality should assist local municipalities in developing a particular guideline, which will ensure that existing townships that do not entirely pay for services start to pay for services that they receive. The process of developing the guideline should involve communities through awareness sessions regarding the importance of paying for services.

Acknowledgements

Special appreciation to the Tshwane University of Technology, in particular, the Department of Public Affairs, for allowing the first author to pursue this study.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

The study was conducted by D.N.M. under the guidance and supervision of R.M.M., R.K.M. and K.M.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of the study are available from the corresponding author, D.N.M., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

References

- Abegunde, O., 2019, 'Local government administration and service delivery in Nigeria: Prospects and challenges', *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Sciences* 3(4), 211–217.
- Agu, S.U. & Okeke, R.C., 2016, 'African states and global challenges in democratic local governance: Any lessons from the European region?', *OGIRISI: A New Journal of African Studies* 12, 236–252. <https://doi.org/10.4314/og.v12i1s1.15>
- Ajam, T., 2012, 'Proposals on municipal capacity building: Doing things differently or re-packaging past initiatives?', *Local Government Bulletin* 14(4), 6–10.
- Akinola, S.R., 2004, 'Local self-governance as an alternative to predatory local governments in Nigeria', *International Journal of Studies in Humanities* 1(3), 47–60.
- Anderson, R., 2007, 'Thematic content analysis (TCA)', in *Descriptive presentation of qualitative data*, pp. 1–4, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Wellknowing Consulting, California.
- Atieno, O.P., 2009, 'An analysis of the strengths and limitation of qualitative and quantitative research paradigms', *Problems of Education in the 21st Century* 13(1), 13–38. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857024541.n2>
- Burger, P. & Calitz, E., 2021, 'Covid-19, economic growth and South African fiscal policy', *South African Journal of Economics* 81(1), 3–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/saje.12270>
- Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, 2009, *State of local government in South Africa. Overview report: National State of local government assessments, working documents, Cooperative governance and traditional affairs*, COGTA, Pretoria.
- Draai, E. & Oshoniyo, O., 2013, 'Scarce and critical skills for local government: Assessing the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality', *Journal of Public Administration* 48(Special issue 1), 867–882.
- Edwards, R. & Holland, J., 2013, *What is qualitative interviewing?*, Bloomsbury Academic, London.
- Ehlanzeni District Municipality (EDM), 2016, *Annual report: 2015/16 financial year*, EDM, Mbombela.
- Ehlanzeni District Municipality (EDM), 2017, *Draft annual report: 2016/17 financial year*, EDM, Mbombela.
- Gqamane, Z. & Taylor, J.D., 2013, 'Capacity building for effective local government leadership and governance', *Journal of Public Administration* 48(Special issue 1), 824–842.
- Groen, C., Simmons, D.R. & McNair, L.D., 2017, 'An introduction to grounded theory: Choosing and implementing an emergent method', in *2017 ASEE Annual conference & exposition*, American Society for Engineering Education, June 24, 2017, pp. 1–18.
- Hammarberg, K., Kirkman, M. & De Lacey, S., 2016, 'Qualitative research methods: When to use them and how to judge them', *Human Reproduction* 31(3), 498–501. <https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/dev334>
- Johnston, S. & Bernstein, A., 2007, *Skills, growth, and migration policy: Overcoming the fatal constraint*, The Centre for Development and Enterprise, Johannesburg.
- Kalonda, J.K. & Govender, K., 2021, 'Factors affecting municipal service delivery: A case study of Katima Mulilo Town Council, Namibia', *African Journal of Public Affairs* 12(2), 1–26.
- Kandula, S., 2017, 'General subsidy as source of income for rural municipalities in Poland', *Management Theory and Studies for Rural Business and Infrastructure Development* 39(1), 57–68. <https://doi.org/10.15544/mts.2017.05>
- Kanyane, M.H., 2011, 'Financial viability of rural municipalities in South Africa', *Journal of Public Administration* 46(2), 935–946.
- Kersting, N., Caulfield, J., Nickson, R.A., Olowu, D. & Wollmann, H., 2009, 'Local governance reform in global perspective', *Urban and Regional Research International*, VS Verlag Fur Sozialwissenschaften, GVV Fachverlage GmbH, Wiesbaden.
- Laubscher, L.H., 2012, 'Challenges on financial control and accountability in South African municipalities', *Journal for New Generation Sciences* 10(1), 63–79.
- Magagula, D.N., 2018, 'The role of district municipalities in improving service delivery in local municipalities: A case study of Ehlanzeni district municipality, Mpumalanga province', Masters dissertation, viewed 23 January 2020, from <http://tutvital.tut.ac.za:8080/vital/access/manager/Repository/tut:4521>.
- Magagula, D.N., Mukonza, R.M., Manyaka, R.K. & Moeti, K.B., 2019, 'Towards strengthening collaboration between district and local municipalities in South Africa: Insights from Ehlanzeni District Municipality', *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 15(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v15i1.673>
- Majekodunmi, A., 2012, 'The state of local government and service delivery in Nigeria: Challenges and prospects', *Africa's Public Service Delivery & Performance Review* 1(3), 84–98. <https://doi.org/10.4102/apsdpr.v1i3.37>
- Masegare, P. & Ngoepe, M., 2018, 'A framework for incorporating implementation indicators of corporate governance for municipalities in South Africa', *Corporate Governance: The International Journal of Business in Society* 18(4), 581–593. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CG-11-2016-0216>
- Masiya, T., Davids, Y.D. & Mangai, M.S., 2019, 'Assessing service delivery: Public perception of municipal service delivery in South Africa', *Theoretical and Empirical Researches in Urban Management* 14(2), 20–40.
- Mathebula, A.M., 2014, *The role and duties of municipalities in the enforcement of Environmental law*, viewed 04 November 2017, from http://www.elasa.co.za/uploads/1/1/8/2/11823994/mathebula_municipalities_in_enforcement.pdf.
- Matsiliza, N.S., 2012, 'Participatory budgeting for sustainable local governance in South Africa', *Journal of Public Administration* 47(2), 443–452.
- Modisha, N.J. & Mtapuri, O., 2013, 'A crisis of expectations versus legislative mandate: The case of Molemole and Blouberg Municipalities in Limpopo, South Africa', *Journal of Public Administration* 48(2), 267–281.
- National Treasury of South Africa, 2011, *Intergovernmental relations and the local government Fiscal framework*, Local Government Budgets and Expenditure Review 2011, National Treasury of South Africa, Pretoria.
- Ngcamu, S.B., 2013, 'A qualitative enquiry into customer care centres: The case of eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality', *Journal of Public Administration* 48(1), 22–34.
- Nyawa, J.C. & Mubangizi, B.C., 2021, 'An exploration of government administrative processes in supporting agro-small holders' access to municipal markets in eThekweni Municipality, KwaZulu-Natal province', *Africa's Public Service Delivery and Performance Review* 9(1), 12. <https://doi.org/10.4102/apsdpr.v9i1.528>
- Organisation for Economic, Co-operation and Development, 2016, *Basic socio-economic indicators*, OECD, Paris.
- Palinkas, L.A., Horwitz, S.M., Green, C.A., Wisdom, J.P., Duan, N. & Hoagwood, K., 2015, 'Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research', *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 42(5), 533–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
- Palmer, I., 2011, 'An assessment of the performance of district municipalities', in *The Municipal Demarcation Board: The first decade of the Municipal Demarcation Board reflections on demarcating local government in South Africa*, viewed 18 December 2017, from <http://pdg.co.za>.
- Radzik-Maruszak, K., 2016, 'Roles of Municipal Councils in Poland and in the Czech Republic: Factors shaping the roles and the dynamic of change', *Journal of Universal Excellence* 5(1), 47–64.
- Reddy, P.S., 2016, 'The politics of service delivery in South Africa: The local government sphere in context', *TD: The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 12(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v12i1.337>
- Republic of South Africa, 1996, *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa: 1996*, Government Gazette, 378(17678), Government Printers, Pretoria.
- Republic of South Africa, 1998, *Local Government: Municipal Structures Act, No. 117 of 1998*, Government Printers, Pretoria.
- Republic of South Africa, 2003, *Local Government: Municipal Finance Management Act, No 56 of 2003*, Government Printers, Pretoria.
- Rubin, H.J. & Rubin, I.S., 2011, *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*, Sage, Los Angeles, CA.
- Schostak, J., 2005, *Interviewing and representation in qualitative research*, McGraw-Hill Education, London.
- Statistics South Africa (STATS SA), 2016, *Community survey 2016*, Census: South Africa, STATS SA, Pretoria.
- Stuckey, H.L., 2013, 'Three types of interviews: Qualitative research methods in social health', *Journal of Social Health and Diabetes* 1(02), 056–059. <https://doi.org/10.4103/2321-0656.115294>
- Sutton, J. & Austin, Z., 2015, 'Qualitative research: Data collection, analysis, and management', *The Canadian Journal of Hospital Pharmacy* 68(3), 226–231. <https://doi.org/10.4212/cjhp.v68i3.1456>

- Swift, N., 2012, *Canada offers its people an array of local governments*, City Mayors Government, viewed 23 November 2017, from http://www.citymayors.com/canada/canada_locgov.html.
- The Presidency, 2009, *Annual report 2008–2009*, The Presidency, Pretoria.
- Tongco, M.D.C., 2007, 'Purposive sampling as a tool for informant selection', *Ethnobotany Research and Applications* 5, 147–158. <https://doi.org/10.17348/era.5.0.147-158>
- Twala, C., 2014, 'The African National Congress (ANC) and the Cadre Deployment Policy in the post-apartheid South Africa: A product of Democratic Centralisation or a recipe for a Constitutional crisis?', *Journal of Social Sciences* 41(2), 159–165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09718923.2014.11893279>
- Van der Mescht, J. & Van Jaarsveld, M., 2012, *Addressing operations and maintenance challenges in smaller municipalities*, IMESA Papers, Port Elizabeth, viewed 09 December 2017, from <https://infrastructurenews.co.za/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2016/04/Addressing-operations-and-maintenance-challenges-in-smaller-municipalities-Johan-van-der-Mescht-Vela-VKE.pdf>.
- Van der Waldt, G., 2014, 'Infrastructure project challenges: The case of Dr Kenneth Kaunda District Municipality', *Journal of Construction Project Management and Innovation* 4(1), 844–862.
- Van Niekerk, T. & Dalton-Brits, E., 2016, 'Mechanisms to strengthen accountability and oversight within municipalities, with specific reference to the municipal public accounts committee and the audit committee of Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality', *African Journal of Public Affairs* 9(3), 117–128.
- Vennekens, A. & Govender, S., 2005, *Local government budget guide*, IDASA Budget Information Service, viewed 18 August 2017, from https://cisp.cachefly.net/assets/articles/attachments/02482_localbudgetguide.pdf.
- Vosloo, J.J., 2014, 'A sport management programme for educator training in accordance with the diverse needs of South African schools', Doctoral dissertation, North-West University, Potchefstroom.
- Whelan, P., 2004, 'The local government equitable share', in *Occasional papers*, Institute for Democratic Alternatives in South Africa (IDASA), Cape Town.