

The Challenges of a Developmental Local Government In Municipal Service Delivery: The Case of Vhembe District Municipality

Ngudo Muthomi¹, Goodman Nghonyama^{2*}, Thanzi Thenga³

^{1,2,3} Department of Public and Development Administration, Faculty of Management, Commerce, And Law, University of Venda, South Africa.

*Email: goodman.nghonyama@univen.ac.za

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on probing the challenges of Developmental Local Government in Municipal service delivery within Vhembe District Municipality. The study further argues that despite the vital role in promoting the socio-economic needs of the communities through local community engagement in the municipality, the Developmental Local Government is challenged with, among other problems, maladministration and corruption. Developmental local governance, also known as local governance for development, aims to improve the future of communities by promoting local socio-economic development programs and projects. This study advocates for a qualitative approach to probe the impediments. The study reveals that various encounters contribute to the challenges of Developmental local government in municipal service delivery in the Vhembe district municipality. To deal with the impediments of municipal service delivery in developmental local government, there is a need for the municipality to foster public accountability. It is therefore recommended that, to ensure capacity building for effective service provision, good governance needs to be ensured. From conclusions drawn from key findings, it is argued that the enhancement of community participation, provision of education and training to municipal employees, has to be implemented through municipal policies.

Introduction

Developmental local government refers to a form of governance that is committed to working alongside residents and community groups to develop long-term solutions that address their social, economic, and material needs while enhancing their overall quality of life (Republic of South Africa, 1998). The developmental local government model emerged in the post-apartheid era as a response to the exclusion, inequality, and fragmented municipal systems. Subban and Theron (2021) highlighted that developmental local government includes a cultivated democratic culture that promotes both citizen participation and equitable development. Furthermore, Madumo (2021) argues that the developmental role of municipalities needs a capable institution, community engagement, and effective service delivery systems that address systematic poverty and underdevelopment.

The Vhembe District Municipality is faced with deep socio-economic challenges that include poverty, unemployment, poor infrastructure, and inefficient service delivery (Molepo, 2023; Stats SA, 2022). These socioeconomic challenges have led to dissatisfaction by the public, which has resulted in community protests and a loss of trust in the municipality. The South African government has created various frameworks to champion municipalities, but governance failure continues to hinder progress. According to the Auditor-General of South Africa (2023), persistent audit disclaimers, mismanagement of funds, and political interference continue to plague many municipalities, including those in Limpopo province.

The challenges continue to block South Africa's ability to fulfil international commitments in the context of global and continental development agendas. The South African National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 anticipates a capable and developmental state that delivers quality public services, promotes inclusive economic growth, and reduces inequality (NPC, 2012). Chapter 13 of the NDP highlights the importance of professionalising public service, building state capacity, and ensuring that municipalities become drivers of development. The poor performance by the Vhembe District Municipality conflicts with these NDP goals and highlights the urgency of institutional reform and policy implementation.

The third sphere of government is regarded as an important driver in the achievement of global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) more particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) (United Nations, 2015). The African Union's Agenda 2063 calls for good governance, effective institutions, and inclusive economic development (African Union Commission, 2015). The failure of municipalities to deliver basic services not only weakens national development but also delays progress toward the achievement of these broader goals.

This study, therefore, is necessary to investigate the governance and institutional challenges that hinder the effective implementation of developmental local government in the Vhembe district municipality.

Literature Review

The main purpose of this literature review is to critically analyse existing studies and policy-based research that relates to the challenges of developmental local government in the delivery of municipal services, focusing on the Vhembe district municipality. This review is structured around five key themes : (1) the theoretical foundation of the study using New Public Management; (2) the conceptualisation and evolution of DLG in South Africa; (3) key challenges affecting municipal service delivery; (4) the research gap; and (5) strategic interventions aimed at strengthening local governance. Using this structure, the study lays the foundation for examining the gaps between governance policy and implementation, and identifying sustainable solutions that will strengthen developmental local government in Vhembe District Municipality and other similar municipalities.

New Public Management Theory (NPM) and Municipal Governance

Serpa and Ferreira (2019) articulate the concept of New Public Management as a system that advocates for accountability in the public sector while focusing on outcomes rather than processes. The New Public Management (NPM) policy was implemented in both the upper and lower levels of government to ensure rapid service delivery while also de-skilling public administration (Robinson, 2015). Public choice and principal-agent theories, which assert that individual self-interest drives bureaucratic behaviour, serve as the theoretical foundations of New Public Management (Robinson, 2015). The democratic administrations of South Africa have increased the availability of essential services to local municipalities in several cities, towns, and rural areas (Nkomo, 2017). Despite the implementation of the New Public Management in local municipalities, poor basic service delivery remains widespread, owing in part to corruption, political patronage, and skill shortages (Mutymbizi; Mokhele, Ndinda, & Hongoro, 2020). Batho Pele principles were developed by South Africa's first democratic administration to make New Public Management workable. These policies aimed to improve government services at all levels (Lekalake, 2016).

The eight Batho Pele principles are as follows: consulting service users; setting service standards; increasing access; ensuring courtesy; providing more and better information; increasing openness and transparency; correcting mistakes and failures; and obtaining the best possible value for money (Lekalake, 2016). To achieve these goals, each municipality must plan following the Integrated Development Plan of the South African government (IDP). Municipalities can use planning to connect and integrate the growing number of sectoral plans, programs, and projects affecting local government operations, as well as to align budgeting and project implementation with strategic priorities (Subban & Theron, 2021). IDPs (Integrated Development Plans) are planning tools that aim to improve basic service delivery in local municipalities (Subban & Theron, 2021)

The concept of New Public Management (NPM) is an important issue in public sector reform. This is because NPM relates to the concept of innovation in the public sector, which discusses changes that can be applied effectively in processes,

products, services, and methods of delivering services to the public (Williams, 2021). In addition, the concept of NPM is also related to public sector performance management issues because performance measurement is one of the main principles of NPM. To further realise the concept of New Public Management in the public bureaucracy, it sought that bureaucratic leaders increase productivity and determine alternative ways of public service based on an economic perspective. They are encouraged to improve and realise public accountability to customers, improve performance, restructure public bureaucratic institutions, redefine organisational missions, streamline bureaucratic processes and procedures, and decentralise policy-making processes. This paper calls for the New Public Management Theory as a way of enhancing the three (Good Es) efficiency, effectiveness, and economic use of resources for effective basic services delivery.

Conceptualization of Developmental Local Government in South Africa

The white paper on local government (1998) introduced Developmental Local Government (DLG), which conceptualised municipalities as more than service providers. The white paper defined DLG as a form of governance that actively works in partnership with the communities to sustainably meet their social, economic, and material needs. The goal of this paradigm change was to reposition municipalities as agents of social fairness, local economic growth, transformation, and democratic engagement in direct reaction to the legacy of apartheid spatial planning.

Sections 152 and 153 of the Republic of South Africa's Constitution (1996) make the developmental mandate legally binding. These sections require towns to provide basic services, promote social and economic development, and foster public participation in governance and decision-making processes. Furthermore, municipalities are encouraged to connect their administrative, budgeting, and planning processes with national development goals. The practical implementation of this development goal has been difficult. According to Reddy (2016), many municipalities struggle to shift from a compliance-based to a developmentally proactive governance approach. Van der Walddt (2021) shares this worry, pointing out that policy coherence and institutional alignment are frequently absent, particularly at the district and local levels. Despite the availability of supporting laws and legislative frameworks, municipalities usually face operational fragmentation, poor intergovernmental coordination, low fiscal discipline, and skill shortages, preventing successful implementation.

Rural municipalities such as Vhembe District continue to face structural and institutional constraints dating back to apartheid. According to Babbie (2021) and Brynard and Hanekom (1997), unequal spatial development, insufficient infrastructure, and historically under-resourced local governments have resulted in governance systems that are unprepared to carry out the broad tasks of DLG. The outcome is frequently a mismatch between progressive local government objectives and reality on the ground, as seen by service delivery backlogs, low citizen participation, and insufficient developmental planning.

In addition to domestic challenges, municipalities such as Vhembe are expected to align their operations with larger global and continental development frameworks. The National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, for example, anticipates a "capable and developmental state," with municipalities at the centre of spatial transformation, inclusive service delivery, and participatory government (NPC, 2012). Similarly, the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities, emphasise the importance of functioning, inclusive, and responsible local institutions.

Inability of municipalities to financially sustain themselves

In South Africa, one of the most critical challenges undermining the effectiveness of developing local government is the incapacity of municipalities to sustain their financial viability. The main root cause of this issue is municipalities' inability to put in place effective revenue collection mechanisms, such as property rates and service fees, which are essential for producing own-source income (SALGA, 2021; AGSA, 2023). Service delivery gaps increase when communities lack the funds necessary to maintain infrastructure, provide basic services, or carry out developmental initiatives.

Service delivery effectiveness is still hampered by institutional capacity limitations and skills shortages, in addition to financial difficulties. The lack of management, financial, and technological skills continues to be a major barrier to local government operations, as Koma (2019) points out. In line with this, Sebola (2022) observes that capacity gaps are particularly acute in rural towns, where politically selected or underqualified employees frequently lack the skills necessary to carry out municipal programs successfully.

According to Mpehle and Mojapelo (2023), weak institutional mechanisms and a lack of professional experience have led to ongoing irregularities in procurement, inadequate planning, and uneven service delivery results. Numerous municipal officials participate in public administration courses and training workshops, but because of a lack of political backing and a practical orientation, these initiatives frequently do not result in better implementation (Reddy & Sokopo, 2020).

To bridge these gaps, the South African government has launched a number of university partnerships and capacity-building initiatives. But as the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA, 2022) notes, these efforts' efficacy is still being weakened by implementation issues, a lack of accountability, and an excessive staff turnover rate. Many municipalities are still unable to fulfil their developmental responsibilities because they are structurally weak and operationally dispersed.

Failure of officials to comply with regulations.

South Africa's Developmental Local Government experiences a significant issue with municipal officials' violations of administrative and procurement regulations, which compromises the accountability, efficiency, and transparency

needed to provide services effectively. Several reports, such as those from the Special Investigating Unit (SIU, 2022) and the Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA, 2023), have uncovered many cases of procurement policy non-compliance, particularly in municipalities, including those in the province of Limpopo. These include misuse of the preferred procurement point system, avoiding competitive bidding procedures, and irregularly appointing service providers.

Inadequate planning and linking to the budget

The success of Developmental Local Government (DLG) is largely dependent on efficient planning and budgeting. The integration of strategic planning and budgetary allocations, however, is a persistent challenge for many South African towns. Poor plan and budget alignment leads to underspending, misallocated spending, and project delays, which compromise the provision of essential services and development projects, according to the National Treasury (2021) and the Auditor-General of South Africa (AGSA, 2023). Municipalities frequently find it challenging to accurately estimate expenses, measure the demands for service delivery, while making sure that funding priorities line up with development goals. Insufficient capacity within supply chain management units exacerbates this, as officials lack the technical know-how to evaluate procurement demand, create suitable contract strategies, and negotiate value-for-money results (Koma, 2019). Fragmented planning and a lack of effective financial discipline are further exacerbated by the lack of realistic Medium-Term Revenue and Expenditure Frameworks (MTREFs) and credible Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) (Reddy & Sokopo, 2020).

The Vhembe District Municipality has experienced unfulfilled community expectations, service delivery demonstrations, and halted infrastructure development as a result of these planning and budgetary issues. To address this, planning processes must be professionalised, data-driven decision-making must be used, and oversight must be strengthened to guarantee that budgets accurately reflect service demands and are carried out as a result.

Non-accountability, fraud, and corruption

Developmental Local Government (DLG) is based on the fundamental concept of accountability, which supports the credibility of public institutions and the confidence of the people they serve. Failure to maintain accountability has been repeatedly noted as a major contributing factor to poor governance in South Africa, particularly in municipalities characterised by corruption, poor management, and a deficiency in consequence management (Reddy & Sokopo, 2020). Fraud and unethical behaviour have increased socioeconomic disparities and public discontent by taking limited public funds from essential service delivery initiatives. Procurement process corruption is very disruptive; typical problems include bid rigging, contractor favouritism, excessive costs, and bypassing of competitive bidding processes (Mpehle & Mojapelo, 2023). Due to political administrative systems and poor internal controls, these acts frequently go unchecked in rural municipalities like those in the province of Limpopo. Consequently, funding

intended for public development gets diverted, and basic infrastructure projects are delayed or abandoned.

The Importance of Developmental Local Government

A key component of South Africa's goal for democratic and socioeconomic change remains developmental local government, or DLG. By promoting inclusive service delivery, local economic development (LED), and community involvement, it attempts to enable municipalities to address local development issues (Reddy & Sokopo, 2020). Reducing poverty, addressing geographical disparities, and enhancing quality of life, especially in rural and historically underprivileged areas, all depend on DLG. Sebola (2022) asserts that DLG empowers local governments to serve as agents of human development, grassroots governance, and local resilience in addition to providing services.

The promotion of Local Economic Development (LED) is a fundamental element of DLG. In places where the national economy has not been able to generate equal growth, LED allows municipalities to boost the local economy, encourage entrepreneurship, draw in investment, and create jobs. Municipalities can create resilient local economies that address community needs and global issues like climate change and economic shocks by collaborating with the business sector and civil society, according to this strategy (SALGA, 2021). Sebola (2022) further highlights that DLG must embrace human development by focusing on housing, health, education, and citizen dignity, especially in rural areas with significant socioeconomic issues as those in Vhembe District Municipality.

The national policy objectives of South Africa are equally in line with DLG. According to the National Planning Commission (2012), the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 promotes a "capable and developmental state" and emphasises the importance of local government in eradicating poverty, guaranteeing fair access to essential services, and promoting spatial change. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, particularly SDG 11, which advocates for inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities and communities, and Agenda 2063 of the African Union, which seeks to promote inclusive growth, good governance, and sustainable development throughout the continent (African Union, 2015), are two other international frameworks to which DLG contributes.

Developmental Local Government is an important instrument for transforming South Africa's democratic values into beneficial outcomes for local populations. Along with providing services, it is crucial for promoting social justice, inclusive economic growth, and the development of a more accountable and democratic local governance structure.

Strategic Interventions to Enhance Developmental Local Government

With new processes and structures at the local government level and throughout government development, strategic interventions became critical to complement these new systems and structures.

Implementation of Integrated Development Planning

In South Africa, municipalities use the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) as a primary planning tool to encourage strategic, coordinated, and inclusive local development. The Municipal Systems Act (2000) requires all municipal councils to establish an IDP at the beginning of their term and to review it every year. According to Gwala and Theron (2020), the IDP offers a cohesive strategic framework for intergovernmental coordination, budgeting, performance management, and socioeconomic growth.

The goal of the IDP process is to bring together different stakeholders, such as service providers, civil society, community members, and municipal departments, to evaluate local requirements and create workable development plans (Pieterse & Parnell, 2018). The objective is to overcome fragmented planning by establishing a cohesive development vision that synchronises municipal operations with the national and provincial governments' plans and priorities, as well as those of state-owned companies like Eskom or Telkom (Mogale, 2021).

The IDP serves as a tool for integrated service delivery and local accountability in addition to being a planning tool. IDPs' effectiveness is mostly dependent on how effectively they coordinate with performance management systems, municipal budgets, and spatial development frameworks (SDFs), claim Hohne and Govender (2022). IDPs have the potential to promote transformative development when properly implemented, since they direct resources toward prioritised goals and encourage equitable growth. Unfortunately, a lack of interdepartmental coordination, political meddling, and capacity limitations make it difficult for many municipalities to connect their strategic plans to actual implementation (Reddy, 2020).

Stakeholder Involvement

Stakeholder involvement is a critical component of Developmental Local Government (DLG), as it enhances transparency, accountability, and responsiveness in municipal governance. Engaging civil society organisations, traditional leaders, and community groups in service delivery processes allows municipalities to align development initiatives with local needs while improving public trust (Mpehle & Mojapelo, 2023). One key area requiring stakeholder oversight is public procurement, where unethical practices persist due to weak internal controls. Involving external stakeholders in bid specification, evaluation, and adjudication committees can help reduce corruption and promote open governance (Khambule, 2021). Open governance fosters collaboration between government and citizens, thereby enhancing legitimacy and co-ownership of public decisions (Mokoena & Sebola, 2022). For stakeholder participation to be meaningful, municipalities must institutionalise formal mechanisms such as ward committees and community liaison structures, ensuring that citizens actively shape planning, budgeting, and service delivery (Reddy, 2020).

Strategic sourcing

Another improvement strategy for developmental local governance in public procurement is the use of centralised and decentralised procurement strategies for

different categories of goods and services. There are many arguments for centralization, specifically better control, and expertise (Staal, 2019:37). However, the answer for poor public procurement practices should instead be sought in strategic sourcing (Madumo, 2021:62). An analysis of public procurement requirements at all levels of government should be done and high-risk-low-cost items (known as bottleneck items) and high-risk-high-cost items (strategic items) should be purchased on a centralized basis with longer-term contracts and high levels of contract and supplier management (Brynard, 2009:1). Leverage items that are low risk, but high cost can be purchased through one agency, for example, a procurement consortium (Staal, 2019:37). The different public institutions then order from the contractor/supplier against a contract, typically through e-procurement, and distribution takes place on a decentralized basis (Babbie, 2021:81). Here, contract management, and particularly feedback on supplier performance, is essential for this type of purchasing to be efficient (Babbie, 2021:81). Non-critical, low-risk-low-cost items (also known as routine items) can be purchased on a decentralized basis using quotations from local suppliers. Over and above the proposed recommendation, local municipalities and municipal entities must engage with the employment of qualified professionals (Staal, 2019:27). Practitioners, training and employment of internship programs, development of effective monitoring and evaluation tools, creation of incentive programs to motivate good performance, and tools and also good

Developing skills and knowledge

Institutions of higher learning and other service providers have a critical role in equipping learners and practitioners with appropriate skills and knowledge (Schneider, 2019: 453). The capacity for qualified practitioners would only be available when educational institutions contribute to the challenge by way of developing a curriculum that meets the needs of the country (Staal, 2019:27). Such programs should provide for an understanding of the knowledge of the South African public sector and its regulations (Staal, 2019:27). For example, of a two-model curriculum where leaders have a choice to focus on the private or public sector. In this model, the skills required are general procurement skills and industry-specific skills. The private sector-oriented, program-specific skills require understanding the general business environment (enterprise management). In contrast, the public sector-oriented program concentrates on the legislative climate (to sensitize leaders to an integrated approach in the management of procurement within the highly regulated public sector environment) (Coetzee, 2021:26). Both programs require general procurement skills, which should include, among others, the knowledge of and insight into the purchasing and supply environment, sourcing strategies, purchasing and supply tasks, integrated supply management, globalization, and technological advancement (Coetzee, 2021:26).

Research Methods

Study Design

This study used a qualitative, conceptual research approach to investigate the difficulties that the Vhembe District Municipality's developmental local government (DLG) faces in providing municipal services. The qualitative method works effectively for studying complicated governance-related problems that are hard to measure, context-dependent, and socially rooted. It makes it possible to comprehend institutional, political, and socioeconomic elements that affect municipal performance in great detail. Given the goal of the study, which is to identify and analyse systemic impediments to efficient service delivery in a rural municipality, the qualitative technique offers the depth and flexibility required to explore these issues comprehensively.

Data Collection

Secondary sources of information were gathered for this study to give a thorough grasp of the difficulties that the Vhembe District Municipality's developmental local government faces. These sources included government policy documents like the White Paper on Local Government (1998), the Constitution of South Africa (1996), the Municipal Systems Act (2000), and the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030; peer-reviewed scholarly literature on developmental local government, public administration, and municipal governance; and recent audit reports by the Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA). Reputable government departments such as Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA), and the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) all contributed case studies and policy papers to the study.

Purposive sampling was used to choose these sources, giving preference to government-commissioned papers and peer-reviewed scholarly works, and considering their applicability to municipal governance in Vhembe and the larger South African environment, in addition to their legitimacy and dependability. Furthermore, an emphasis on recent papers (2015–2024) made sure that the study took into account the most recent advancements and viewpoints. This specific literature selection offered theoretical foundations as well as empirically supported insights into the institutional, structural, and policy-related obstacles to efficient municipal service delivery in the Vhembe District.

Data Analysis

A qualitative content analysis method was used to synthesise and evaluate the information gathered. With this approach, a selection of documents and literature was systematically reviewed to find, code, and classify important themes related to the study's main topic. The investigation was directed by specific topics that surfaced, such as institutional design, community participation, administrative capacity, political intervention, and financial sustainability. Through the analysis of recurrent themes and patterns in multiple sources, the study created a systematic and thematic understanding of the governance shortcomings that prevent the

Vhembe District Municipality from having an effective local government that promotes development. Because it can analyse textual data and reveal deeper meanings in documents and laws, qualitative content analysis is frequently employed in social science research. As such, it is ideally suited to investigate the intricate institutional and political dynamics.

Ethical Consideration

No individuals were participating in this desktop-based conceptual study; consequently, institutional ethical approval was not required. However, throughout this study, strict guidelines for academic honesty were adhered to. This was made possible by tight reliance on publicly available government papers and peer-reviewed scholarly literature, proper citation of all sources used, and open documentation of methodological decisions. In the analysis and presentation of results, these steps were taken to encourage scholarly rigour, credibility, and replicability.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Vhembe District Municipality possesses a wide range of institutional and governance-related obstacles to the successful implementation of developmental local government (DLG). Three main issues surfaced from an examination of secondary data and interview insights: a lack of community involvement and accountability, corruption and political interference, and financial constraints and resource mismanagement. These themes emphasise greater governance shortcomings and show a significant discrepancy between DLG's policy goals and the actual conditions of municipal service delivery.

Financial Constraints and Resource Mismanagement

The Vhembe District Municipality's weak financial resources and inadequate financial management systems provide a serious obstacle to service delivery. The municipality's reliance on national transfers, which are frequently insufficient to meet local service demands, poor budget planning, and insufficient revenue collection methods are its main problems. AGSA's audit reports from 2023 show a lot of unauthorised, irregular, and ineffective spending, which points to a lack of financial accountability and inadequate internal controls. Due to a lack of resources, infrastructure projects have been delayed, and current services have not been properly maintained, which has resulted in widespread discontent and sporadic protests over service delivery.

Corruption and Political Interference

The study goes on to name political interference, nepotism, and corruption as systemic governance issues facing the Vhembe District Municipality. These include the misappropriation of municipal finances, the employment of unqualified employees because of political links, and irregular tender processes. Such actions erode public trust, compromise institutional competency, and lead to poor or unfinished service delivery initiatives. It is difficult for moral and capable

governance to establish itself because of the ongoing blurring of accountability lines caused by the overlap between political and administrative functions (Mpehle & Mojapelo, 2023). This has led to a culture of government where political allegiance takes precedence over progress.

Community Engagement and Accountability

The municipality continues to demonstrate poor public participation in planning, monitoring, and decision-making processes, despite the existence of awareness campaigns and a few community consultation procedures. Many times, citizens feel left out or ignored, which exacerbates the rift between the state and community and feeds resentment. The fundamental tenets of DLG, which prioritise participatory governance and co-production of services, conflict with the absence of organised channels of communication and real opportunities for participation. Additionally, a lack of response to community grievances undermines trust in municipal institutions and frequently turns tensions into protests over service delivery (Tshishonga, 2022).

Analysis And Strategic Solutions

The findings of this study indicate an overall inability to convert South Africa's progressive legislative and policy frameworks into significant development outcomes at the grassroots level. Deeper institutional flaws, dysfunctional governance, and a lack of development focus in local government operations are all reflected in the gap between the constitutional mandates, specifically, Sections 152 and 153, and the realities of municipal service delivery. Several strategic initiatives are required to solve these systemic issues.

First, financial reform is crucial; through focused training and digital transformation, municipalities must fortify their systems for revenue collection, audit compliance, and budgeting. Second, strong anti-corruption measures are required, such as the establishment of strong whistleblower protections, rigorous enforcement of procurement laws, and a distinct division between political and administrative responsibilities. Third, there should be a focus on capacity-building programs to professionalise the municipal workforce through partnerships with higher education institutions and accredited training. Fourth, it is necessary to develop frequent community forums, include citizen input into Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), and use digital platforms to promote two-way communication to improve public engagement. Finally, implementing performance monitoring frameworks that are in line with Agenda 2063, the National Development Plan (NDP 2030), and Sustainable Development Goal 11 can support more accountability, openness, and efficient local governance for development.

Conclusion

This study intended to investigate the challenges to the successful application of developmental local government (DLG) in the Vhembe District Municipality, emphasising the provision of municipal services. Based on secondary data sources and qualitative content analysis, the study discovered that although the

Constitution and policy framework are sound and are based on the principles of the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, the 1998 White Paper on Local Government, and the South African Constitution, the actual implementation of DLG is still limited, particularly in rural municipalities like Vhembe. Key findings showed that the municipality's capacity to provide high-quality and long-lasting services is consistently weakened by several issues, including a lack of funding, institutional capacity gaps, low community participation, corruption, maladministration, and political interference. The lack of efficient implementation techniques has increased the discrepancy between the goals of the policy and the results of service delivery, even though the municipality recognises the significance of DLG in fostering socioeconomic development and inclusive government.

The study shows that DLG cannot fulfil its transformative function in achieving spatial justice and fair development without effective financial management, professionalised human resources, community involvement, and performance accountability. The difficulties are not specific to Vhembe; rather, they are indicative of more widespread structural flaws in the local governance system of South Africa.

The findings of this study add to the expanding literature of study advocating for immediate transformation of institutions, innovative governance, and strategic coordination between local and national development goals. The Vhembe District Municipality has the potential to close the gap between democratic ideals and actual reality by enhancing capacity, ensuring accountability, and incorporating communities in decision-making processes. It will need sustained political will, focused interventions, and a renewed dedication to the core principles of public service to achieve sustainable, inclusive, and developmental local governance.

Although this study provides significant conceptual and practical insights into the discourse of developmental local government and municipal service delivery, certain methodological limitations must be acknowledged. This study relies entirely on a qualitative, conceptual desktop approach utilizing secondary data sources without integrating primary empirical data, such as direct interviews or surveys with municipal officials, local administrators, and community members within the Vhembe District Municipality. This approach potentially limits the depth of the analysis regarding the real-time, micro-level political and administrative dynamics occurring on the ground. Furthermore, because the analytical focus is strictly bound to the specific case of the Vhembe District, the findings regarding maladministration, procurement corruption, and financial resource constraints cannot be broadly generalized to all other municipalities across South Africa, which may possess vastly different fiscal capacities and socio-demographic profiles. Therefore, future research should adopt a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative surveys and in-depth stakeholder interviews to generate a more comprehensive and generalizable evaluation of local governance policy implementation

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