

# Local Government Autonomy in South Africa: Governance, Service Delivery, and Development Agendas

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**Abstract:** In terms of section 151 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) envisions local government as an autonomous sphere of government. However, in practice, political systems and dominant party structures have eroded this autonomy, weakening local representation and decision-making. Local government remains a key mechanism for providing essential services such as water, electricity, housing, and infrastructure, aimed at narrowing socio-economic disparities and improving citizens' quality of life. Despite its critical role, local government in South Africa continues to face major governance and service delivery challenges, including maladministration, political interference, administrative inefficiencies, working in silos, inadequate resources, and persistent corruption, all of which constrain its effectiveness. This study seeks to explore the governance challenges that erode local government autonomy and contribute to poor service delivery in South African municipalities. The study adopted a Network Governance theory, which posits that governance involves managing relationships among interlinked organisations with shared policy goals, arguing that no single actor or institution can effectively address multifaceted socio-economic problems alone. The study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the governance challenges. Secondary data sources such as policy documents, government reports, and academic publications were used to validate the study. Thematic discourse analysis is employed to identify core governance and service delivery challenges. In addressing these challenges, the study advocates for the revision of the 1998 White Paper on Local Government as a crucial step toward improving municipal performance and responsiveness. Updating this framework would help dismantle systemic barriers built over three decades and strengthen the efficiency of essential delivery, particularly in water, sanitation, and electricity. Furthermore, the study recommends breaking down working in silos among the three spheres of government. The study advocates that there is a need to enhance intergovernmental coordination, broaden stakeholder participation, and build institutional capacity to promote sustainable governance and effective service outcomes.

**Keywords:** Autonomy, Governance, local government, service delivery, working in silos

## Introduction

Section 151 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, positions local government as an autonomous sphere responsible for delivering essential services such as water, electricity, housing, and infrastructure (RSA, 1996). However, this autonomy has been gradually eroded by governance challenges, fragmented priorities, and weak institutional capacity, undermining the developmental mandate of municipalities. As Britz (2025) notes, the government aims to enhance service delivery and governance through the Medium-Term Development Plan (MTDP 2024–2029), which seeks to improve policy coherence, build institutional capacity, and combat corruption. This aligns with the National Development Plan (NDP), South Africa's long-term vision to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality by 2030 through inclusive growth and job creation (Naidoo & Mare, 2015; Wyk, 2020). Both the NDP and MTDP emphasise the need for an effective, developmental state capable of coordinating national, provincial, and local efforts (Fourie, 2018). Within this framework, local government remains the closest sphere to the people and is central to translating national objectives into tangible outcomes. Through mechanisms like Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and Local Economic Development (LED) initiatives,

municipalities are expected to drive socio-economic transformation and promote environmental sustainability (Rogerson, 2000; Sowman & Brown, 2006). Yet, as studies by Lyon (2015), Mustafa (2017), and Kgobe (2024) reveal, the effectiveness of local governance is often constrained by limited capacity, poor coordination, and weak accountability systems. Comparative research further indicates that disparities in local institutional strength directly affect service delivery outcomes (Hassan, Akintola & Hassan, 2024). Moreover, while community engagement is crucial for improving accountability and service responsiveness, it remains inadequately integrated into local governance processes (Kgobe, 2024). Consequently, the persistent governance challenges facing municipalities not only weaken local government autonomy but also impede South Africa's broader developmental agenda. This study, therefore, examines the governance factors eroding municipal independence and their implications for achieving the country's socio-economic transformation goals. This study seeks to explore the governance challenges that erode local government autonomy and contribute to poor service delivery in South African municipalities.

### **Problem Statement**

Local government is mandated by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the Municipal Systems Act, and the Structures Act to be independent and responsible for governing the local affairs of its community. However, despite the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) establishing local government as an autonomous and equal sphere within a non-hierarchical system, this autonomy has been undermined by hierarchical political and party structures. These political arrangements (interference) have weakened the local government's voice, prioritising provincial and national interests over municipal needs (The South African Cities Network, 2022; RSA, 1996, RSA, 2000, RSA, 20003). The South African Cities Network (2022) stated that the Constitution further makes provision for provinces to take over municipal functions when a municipality fails to fulfil its obligations, which blurs the lines around municipal autonomy, given the discrepancies between well-functioning and struggling municipalities. Fiscal centralisation exacerbates this challenge, leaving municipalities financially constrained and unable to sustain effective service delivery. Additionally, overlapping and concurrent responsibilities among the three spheres of government create confusion and inefficiency, as constitutional provisions and administrative practices blur the boundaries of authority. Although cooperative governance aims to promote alignment and clarity, the persistent disconnect between political governance structures and local developmental imperatives continues to weaken municipal functionality. As a result, local government in South Africa continues to face major governance and service delivery challenges, including maladministration, political interference, administrative inefficiencies, working in silos, inadequate resources, and party coalitions (e.g., Government of National Unity (GUN) and persistent corruption, all of which constrain its effectiveness (The South African Cities Network, 2022; Mamokhere, 2024). For instance, Party factionalism and coalitions should not – but do – affect the functioning of local government. In some cases, factionalism has hampered effective administration, caused a lack of clear direction and decision-making, disrupted service delivery, and diminished investor and business confidence. Coalitions often form out of convenience rather than ideology, which creates significant difficulties within councils. This study seeks to explore the governance challenges that erode local government autonomy and contribute to poor service delivery in South African municipalities.

### **Research Methods and Materials**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to investigate the evolving role of local government within South Africa's macro-development agenda. The qualitative approach is selected to gain in-depth insights into governance structures, policy frameworks, and service delivery outcomes. The desktop approach was used to examine specific instances of local governance and service delivery nationwide. This approach enables a detailed examination of the complexities and distinctions of local government operations and their impact on macroeconomic development goals. Data for this study were gathered from secondary sources, including governmental reports, policy documents, and scholarly publications about service delivery and governance. These sources provide a comprehensive understanding of the current state of local governance and its challenges. A desktop study, also known as a desk study or desk research, is a research method that involves collecting and analysing existing information from secondary sources like books, reports, and websites, rather than gathering new data through fieldwork or surveys. To avoid bias in the selection of the studies, the authors used keywords to identify relevant studies, and the abstracts were also read to validate their relevance. Furthermore, in this desktop study, the authors conducted a dual review, which refers to the process of having two independent reviewers assess the same set of studies to minimise bias and ensure thoroughness. This process allowed us to independently screen titles, abstracts, and full-text articles, then compare their selections and resolve any discrepancies. The collected data is analysed thematically to identify key governance challenges and best practices. Thematic analysis involves coding the data and recognising emergent patterns and themes, which aids in understanding the underlying issues and potential solutions. The study is grounded in three

fundamental theoretical perspectives: the Democratic Participatory School, which emphasises the importance of local government in fostering citizen engagement and accountability; the Efficiency Services School, which regards local governance as a mechanism for effective and responsive service delivery; and the Development School, which views local government as a catalyst for socio-economic growth and transformation. These theoretical frameworks guide the analysis and interpretation of the data, providing a robust context for understanding the role of local governments in macroeconomic development. Ethical considerations are paramount in this study. All secondary data sources are cited appropriately to maintain academic integrity. Additionally, the research adheres to ethical guidelines, including respect for intellectual property and the confidentiality of sensitive information.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study embraces the Network Governance Theory by R.A.W. Rhodes, initiated in 1996. The study argues that despite the South African Constitution positioning local government as an autonomous and equal sphere within a cooperative governance framework, its autonomy has been eroded by hierarchical political arrangements and fragmented institutional practices. This misalignment reflects a deeper governance disjuncture between constitutional ideals and political realities, where centralised control, overlapping mandates, and fiscal constraints undermine local authority and responsiveness. From the lens of Network Governance Theory (Rhodes, 1996; 1997), this fragmentation exemplifies the challenges of hierarchical governance systems that fail to foster interdependence, trust, and horizontal coordination among actors. Instead of functioning as collaborative networks, many municipalities operate in silos, with weak inter-organisational linkages between local, provincial, and national spheres. This results in duplication of efforts, limited information sharing, and reduced accountability—conditions that Rhodes (2007) and Klijn and Koppenjan (2016) argue hinder effective collective action.

Applying the principles of Network Governance Theory suggests that improving local government effectiveness in South Africa requires shifting from a top-down bureaucratic model toward a networked governance approach. Such an approach promotes inter-sectoral cooperation among municipalities, provincial and national departments, private entities, and civil society organisations to jointly address developmental challenges and enhance service delivery. This model aligns with the Constitution's cooperative governance ideals by emphasizing mutual dependence, shared responsibility, and collaborative problem-solving, as opposed to rigid political hierarchies that constrain autonomy. As Klijn (2008) and Agranoff (2007) note, network governance enhances transparency, builds trust, and leverages collective expertise—key factors for strengthening Local Economic Development (LED) and integrated planning within municipalities.

However, the persistence of political interference, administrative inefficiencies, and inadequate coordination continues to weaken the potential for networked collaboration in local governance. Power asymmetries between government levels and uneven resource distribution perpetuate dependency and centralisation, contradicting the horizontal partnerships envisioned by Network Governance Theory. Thus, local government in South Africa continues to face major governance and service delivery challenges, including maladministration, working in silos, inadequate resources, and corruption, which erode its autonomy and effectiveness. In this context, the present study applies Network Governance Theory to explore how these governance deficiencies undermine collaboration and contribute to poor service delivery in South African municipalities. Recent cases of maladministration in Limpopo include a R167 million fake tender at the Mogalakwena Local Municipality, allegations of fraud and irregular tenders at the Polokwane Municipality, and the looting of millions of rands from the Greater Letaba Municipality's Driver's Licence Testing Centre. Several municipalities, such as Lephalale, have also seen officials arrested for corruption and bribery related to activities like selling driver's licenses.

### **Theoretical Findings And Discussion**

#### **Local Government Autonomy in a Developmental State**

In terms of section 151 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) envisions local government as an autonomous sphere of government. But, in the twenty-first century, local governments evolved into key drivers of developmental agendas, extending their responsibilities beyond traditional service delivery. In South Africa, the vision of a developmental state, which prioritises economic advancement, has consequently become central to the local government mandate (Koma, 2012, cited in Ramodula & Govender, 2021). The concept of developmental local government has gained momentum as municipalities increasingly emerge as pivotal actors in global economic networks. This shift necessitates that municipalities formulate and implement local economic development policies aimed at fostering social well-being, growth, and community prosperity. In recent years, South African municipalities have faced growing public and institutional pressure to enhance both service delivery and local economic development

performance. According to Section 156 of the South African Constitution, local government possesses both executive and legislative authority, affirming its status as an autonomous sphere of governance. This constitutional provision empowers municipalities to define their own developmental paths and to design, implement, and monitor strategies that align with their constitutional responsibilities and long-term vision (Ramodula & Govender, 2021). Mamokhere (2024) states that the developmental agendas of local government are affected by leadership types and governance challenges. It is further found that governance is eroding South African local government autonomy through different factors, such as political interference that politicises administrative roles, corruption, and a lack of financial capacity and accountability. Other key factors are inadequate administrative capacity, coalitions, poor service delivery, bureaucratic hindrances, and the disruptive impact of public service delivery protests, which erode public trust and hinder long-term strategic planning. Latest cases of maladministration in Limpopo include a R167 million fake tender at the Mogalakwena Local Municipality, allegations of fraud and irregular tenders at the Polokwane Municipality, and the looting of millions of rands from the Greater Letaba Municipality's Driver's Licence Testing Centre. Several municipalities, such as Lephalale, have also seen officials arrested for corruption and bribery related to activities like selling driver's licenses. SACN (2022) indicates that despite the ideal of cooperative governance and the urgent need for all three spheres of government to work together to realise local government's developmental agendas, the past 30 years have shown a disconnect among political governance and the economy, and a weakening of local government. Local government autonomy has been weakened by political interference and party structures, which are hierarchical by their nature.

### **Transition of Local Government Structures in South Africa**

The transformation of South Africa's local government system unfolded in multiple stages, beginning with the Local Government Transition Act of 1993, which initiated the restructuring process. This led to the first democratic local government elections in 1995/96 and eventually to the establishment of new governance frameworks in 2000 (Kanyane & Koma, 2006). The evolution of local government from the apartheid period to the present day has been marked by extensive legislative and institutional reforms designed to promote democracy, development, and improved service delivery. The end of apartheid in 1994 represented a pivotal moment in South Africa's governance landscape. The 1996 Constitution subsequently introduced a democratic and developmental framework grounded in human rights principles, establishing three interrelated spheres of government—national, provincial, and local—with local government serving as the sphere closest to the public and tasked with the direct delivery of essential services (Mlambo & Maserumule, 2023).

Several key legislative milestones have defined this transformation:

- The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, provided the foundation for democratic local governance, mandating municipalities to promote sustainable development and service delivery.
- The Local Government Transition Act, 1993, facilitated the shift from racially segregated local administrations to inclusive, democratic municipalities, dismantling apartheid-era structures.
- The White Paper on Local Government, 1998, introduced the concept of developmental local government, outlining the coordinating role of municipalities in integrating development efforts across different government spheres.
- The Local Government Municipal Demarcation Act, 1998, established principles for municipal boundary demarcation to ensure fair and effective governance.
- The Local Government Municipal Systems Act, 2000, created a framework for planning, performance management, and public participation, reinforcing municipalities' developmental role.

The transformation of local government structures has been central to South Africa's democratic transition, fostering a developmental governance model aimed at economic growth, job creation, and poverty reduction. The 1996 Constitution recognised local government as an autonomous but interrelated sphere connected to both national and provincial tiers, ensuring sustainable service delivery while safeguarding human rights (Binza, 2005; Mlambo & Maserumule, 2023). The system comprises three categories: metropolitan, district, and local municipalities (Madumo, 2015), totalling 257 municipalities, including eight major metropolitan areas such as Johannesburg and Cape Town. These entities are responsible for critical services like water, electricity, sanitation, and housing (Kgobe, 2020).

The developmental local government approach emerged as a strategic response to the country's deep socio-economic inequalities, with an emphasis on local economic development policies that drive inclusive growth and improve community livelihoods (Koma, 2012; Parnell, Pieterse, Swilling & Wooldridge, 2022). The theoretical basis of South Africa's local government combines autonomous and integrationist elements; however, its implementation often

reflects the latter, marked by strong intergovernmental interdependence (Cameron, 2001). Despite this robust framework, municipalities continue to grapple with corruption, financial constraints, and weak service delivery, resulting in diminished public confidence and escalating service delivery protests (Reddy, 2018; Mlambo & Maserumule, 2023; Mamokhere, 2024). The historical and contemporary evolution of local government thus highlights the tension between constitutional aspirations, developmental objectives, and practical limitations. While the system is designed to empower municipalities and foster socio-economic transformation, persistent challenges demand continuous reform and capacity strengthening to realise the broader goals of post-apartheid reconstruction and development.

### **The Role and Responsibilities of Local Government in a Developmental Agenda**

In a developmental state, local government is responsible for acting as a primary driver of growth and inclusion by focusing on both the provision of essential services and the active development of communities. Key roles include fostering economic growth, providing infrastructure, and ensuring the delivery of social services, while simultaneously encouraging citizen participation in decision-making processes and acting as a catalyst for local development initiatives (COGTA, 2013). Furthermore, COGTA (2013) stated that developmental local government has core responsibilities encompassing economic development, service delivery, community development, citizen participation and governance, infrastructure and land use, and public safety and health. It promotes local businesses, manages essential services like water and sanitation, and works with citizens, particularly marginalised groups, to address their needs. The government encourages community involvement in decision-making, ensures transparency, and establishes partnerships for local development. Additionally, it plans and maintains infrastructure, manages land use through zoning regulations, and provides public safety and health services.

Local governments in South Africa play a vital role in the country's development agenda, especially in promoting economic growth, creating jobs, and reducing poverty. This duty is protected by the South African Constitution and various policy frameworks, which highlight the importance of local economic development (LED) strategies. Local governments put these strategies into action to address unemployment, poverty, and resource shortages. Such initiatives are crucial for stimulating local economies and improving residents' quality of life (Mashamaite & Lethoko, 2018; Khambule, 2018). The idea of developmental local government has changed significantly since the end of apartheid, focusing on establishing a democratic level of government that is closely connected to the community. This development has expanded the responsibilities of municipalities, often without enough resources, making it harder to manage developmental projects effectively (Nel & Binns, 2001). Moreover, local governments are tasked with promoting socio-economic rights as a fundamental part of sustainable development, aligning with the Constitution's focus on providing basic services and protecting socio-economic rights (Rensburg & Naude, 2007). Britz (2025) states that the role of local government in South Africa cannot be overstressed, as municipalities are responsible for delivering essential services to citizens. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, designates local government as an independent sphere of government. Local government is critical for providing basic services such as water, sanitation, electricity, housing, and infrastructure development.

However, many local governments encounter challenges such as limited administrative capacity, skills shortages, and inadequate resources, which impede effective policy implementation and service delivery (Mashamaite & Lethoko, 2018). There is often a lack of coordination among local institutions, which undermines the developmental objectives of local economic development agencies (Khambule, 2018). Moreover, challenges such as insufficient public participation and suboptimal infrastructure delivery have an adverse impact on developmental outcomes (Ngumbela, 2023). To a greater extent, local governments in South Africa play a crucial role in the country's development agenda, with responsibilities that encompass economic development, service delivery, and the promotion of socio-economic rights. However, addressing resource constraints and coordination issues is essential to enhance their effectiveness in fulfilling these roles. The success of local governments in driving development is critical for realising South Africa's broader development goals. The relationship between local governance and the national development agenda in South Africa presents a complex and evolving dynamic vital for achieving sustainable development and mitigating socio-economic disparities. Local governments play a crucial role in implementing national policies and facilitating development initiatives at the community level. In the context of post-apartheid reconstruction and development, South Africa has established a framework of 'developmental local government' designed to enhance the proximity of governance to the populace, thereby underscoring the significance of local governance in achieving national development objectives (Parnell et al., 2022; Ngumbela, 2023). Despite these ambitious aspirations, local governments encounter substantial obstacles, including insufficient resources, a lack of requisite skills, and pervasive issues such as corruption and inadequate infrastructure delivery. These challenges critically impede the effective realisation of developmental goals (Maela, Matloga, & Zitha, 2024). The successful implementation of both global and national

agendas, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), necessitates robust multi-level governance frameworks. This requires a delicate balance between top-down directives and bottom-up approaches to ensure that local realities are adequately incorporated into policy execution (Fourie, 2018; Croese, Oloko, Simon, & Valencia, 2021).

Furthermore, aligning South Africa's National Development Plan with international frameworks, such as the 2030 Agenda, is contingent upon prioritising political buy-in, maintaining national ownership, and enhancing institutional structures. This alignment is crucial for the effective implementation of coherent policies across various levels of government (Fourie, 2018). Local governance reforms advocate for participatory democracy and the active involvement of communities, with a particular emphasis on marginalised groups, including women. Nevertheless, significant challenges persist in ensuring meaningful participation and addressing power imbalances among stakeholders (Kgobe, Bayat & Karriem, 2024). In summary, the interplay between local governance and the national development agenda in South Africa is crucial for achieving sustainable development. While the foundation for developmental local governance has been established, considerable challenges remain concerning resource allocation, capacity building, and effective community participation. Addressing these issues through coherent policy alignment and multi-level governance frameworks could significantly enhance the role of local governments in the overarching national development trajectory.

### **Key Frameworks of Developmental Agendas In South Africa**

Key drivers of South Africa's developmental agenda include the National Development Plan (NDP), Local Economic Development, Integrated Development Plan and District Development Model and others. The abovementioned key drivers are outlined below:

#### *National Development Plan*

Key drivers of South Africa's developmental agenda include the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, which aims to reduce poverty and inequality, and the goal of building a capable and developmental state. Other significant factors are addressing the "triple challenges" of poverty, inequality, and unemployment; promoting active citizenship and social cohesion; and leveraging capabilities like skills, infrastructure, and partnerships (Tregenna, Ewinyu, Oqubay, Valodia, 2021). Matona (2019:7) stated that "the NDP has a 74% convergence with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and prioritises job creation, the elimination of poverty, the reduction of inequality and growing an inclusive economy by 2030. Recognising the interconnectedness of these complementary aspirations and developmental agendas, South Africa has recently established a national coordinating mechanism for national engagements and reporting on the 2030 Agenda, the AU's Agenda 2063 and the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP), in alignment with the NDP. This national coordinating mechanism will ensure that national resources are optimally deployed, together with international support, the provision of public sector finance, technology and capacity building, which are required for successful integrated implementation of these development agendas".

#### *Local Economic Development*

Local Economic Development form the cornerstone of South Africa's developmental local government framework (Zitha et al., 2025). LED aims to harness and enhance the economic potential of local areas by promoting entrepreneurship, attracting investment, and creating sustainable employment opportunities. It is a locally driven process that seeks to empower communities, particularly those historically marginalised, to participate in and benefit from economic activities within their regions. Through LED initiatives, municipalities strive to diversify local economies, support small and medium enterprises (SMEs), strengthen local value chains, and stimulate innovation to improve competitiveness. Ultimately, LED serves as a key mechanism for reducing poverty, inequality, and unemployment, aligning closely with the national development priorities outlined in the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 (Diseko, 2014). Zitha et al. (2025) imply that LED plays a critical role in a developmental state by enhancing service delivery and achieving development goals, such as poverty reduction, job creation, and improved quality of life. It acts as a catalyst by creating a stronger local economy, which generates tax revenue and resources that can be reinvested into public services. In a developmental state context, local governments use their functions, such as land-use planning, and foster partnerships with private and public stakeholders to stimulate investment, create jobs, and build resilience.

### *Integrated Development Plan*

The IDP is fundamental to developmental local government in South Africa, aligning budgeting and project implementation with strategic priorities while coordinating various sectoral plans and projects. Recent views elevate the IDP as a vital part of intergovernmental planning and coordination. Its developmental aim is to promote strategic decision-making, enhance local democracy, ensure goal-oriented budgeting, achieve developmental outcomes, and improve coordination in service delivery (Sebei, 2014). The IDP functions as the strategic planning instrument of local government. It integrates social, economic, spatial, environmental, and infrastructural aspects of development into a single, comprehensive framework. The IDP ensures that municipal development efforts are aligned with community priorities, promoting participatory governance by incorporating citizen input into planning and decision-making processes. It also guides municipal budgeting and resource allocation, ensuring that financial investments correspond with long-term development objectives. In this way, the IDP serves as a roadmap for coordinated development across various sectors and government departments within a municipality (Sebei, 2014; Mathebula, Nkuna, & Sebola, 2016).

### *District Development Model*

According to CoGTA (2023:1), there is a lack of coordination among national, provincial, and local governments that has significantly hindered effective governance in the country. Operating in an isolated manner, or "silos," has created a disjointed approach to planning and implementation, complicating oversight of government programs. This issue was highlighted by the President in the 2019 Budget Speech, which pointed to how such fragmentation has led to suboptimal service delivery and exacerbated the challenges of poverty, inequality, and unemployment. In response, a new integrated district-based approach has been proposed to improve service delivery by localising procurement, fostering job creation, and ensuring community involvement in development efforts. This developmental state model, known as the District Development Model (DDM), emphasises the execution of priority projects that aim to stabilise local government and institutionalise integrated planning, budgeting, and delivery through the "One Plan." The DDM concentrates on enhancing the capacity of the state as local governance is solidified, with a vision of improving cooperative governance, integrated planning, spatial transformation, and inclusive economic development. Citizen empowerment and partnership in development are also central to DDM, fostering a capable and ethical developmental state, ultimately aiming to rectify the inefficiencies in local governance and service delivery. The DDM represents a more recent innovation in South Africa's governance system, designed to strengthen intergovernmental coordination and planning. It adopts a "One District, One Plan, One Budget" approach, ensuring that national, provincial, and local government interventions are harmonised within each district or metropolitan area. The DDM seeks to eliminate duplication, improve resource efficiency, and ensure that all levels of government work collaboratively toward shared developmental outcomes. It also emphasises addressing district-specific challenges, such as unemployment, poverty, infrastructure backlogs, and service delivery inefficiencies, through joint planning and implementation (CoGTA, 2023).

Together, LED, IDP, and DDM provide a holistic framework for developmental governance at the local level. LED drives economic growth from the ground up, the IDP ensures structured and community-responsive planning, and the DDM enables integrated action across all spheres of government. When effectively implemented, these frameworks have the potential to transform municipalities into engines of inclusive economic growth, social equity, and sustainable development.

### **Governance Challenges Contributing to Poor Developmental State and Service Delivery**

Poor governance and systemic inefficiencies have been widely recognised as the primary causes of weak developmental performance and poor service delivery in South African municipalities. Studies by Dube, Mnguni, and Tschudin (2021) reveal that ineffective governance structures have a direct and detrimental effect on municipal performance, while Ngumbela (2022) identifies several interrelated factors, such as limited community participation, corruption, political interference and instability, weak accountability, and poor institutional capacity, that continue to undermine local government effectiveness. Municipalities frequently operate in silos, lacking coordination between departments and across spheres of government (Meyer & Meyer, 2016; Rogerson, 2019). This fragmentation results in duplication of resources, delayed implementation, and confusion over responsibilities, all of which weaken collaborative governance and reduce the impact of development initiatives. The consequences of these siloed practices are significant, leading to inefficiency, poor communication, and weak partnerships with stakeholders, ultimately diminishing service quality and community trust (Scott & Gong, 2021).

Another major contributor to ineffective local governance is the lack of accountability, transparency, and public participation. Municipalities often suffer from mismanagement, nepotism, and the appointment of unqualified

personnel, which hinder service delivery and deepen community dissatisfaction (Mamokhere, 2024; Tshikhundamalema, 2022; Thusi & Selepe, 2023; Managa, 2021). Inadequate financial controls and non-compliance with reporting standards further erode governance effectiveness (Kgobe, 2024b). Weak institutional capacity and insufficient skills at the local level have led to persistent service delivery protests, as communities express frustration with the government's unresponsiveness (Kalonda & Govender, 2021; Mamokhere & Kgobe, 2023). Corruption remains a pervasive problem, diverting public funds from service provision and eroding institutional integrity (Mabeba, 2021; Zerihun & Mashigo, 2022; Development Bank of Southern Africa, 2023). The lack of access to municipal information also prevents citizens from holding officials accountable, perpetuating mistrust and fuelling further protest action (Ngcamu, 2019; Bob, 2018; Rulashe & Ijeoma, 2022).

Finally, political and structural challenges, including administrative interference, instability, demarcation changes, and rapid urbanisation, have further weakened municipal developmental capacity. While the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) positions local government as an autonomous sphere, political dominance and interference have compromised its independence (Britz, 2025; Pretorius, 2017; Mamokhere, 2024; Tsheola & Sebola, 2023). Political infighting and unstable coalitions since the 2011, 2016, and 2021 elections have disrupted governance and service delivery (Thusi & Selepe, 2023). Municipal boundary reconfigurations, although aimed at improving efficiency, have instead created administrative confusion, inequitable resource allocation, and community tensions (Netswera, 2022; Mamokhere, 2024). Furthermore, rapid urbanisation in cities such as Johannesburg and Tshwane has outpaced infrastructure development, overwhelmed municipalities and widened service delivery gaps, particularly for low-income communities (Mthiyane, Wissnik, & Chiwawa, 2022; Mamokhere, 2024). Collectively, these governance, political, and structural challenges continue to obstruct the vision of a developmental local government capable of delivering inclusive and sustainable growth.

### **Improving Service Delivery in South African Developmental Local Government**

The study found that there is a weak local government system with diminishing trust by communities and high levels of maladministration and corruption, which is making it difficult to achieve the set objective of becoming a developmental local government. Recent cases of maladministration in Limpopo include a R167 million fake tender at the Mogalakwena Local Municipality, allegations of fraud and irregular tenders at the Polokwane Municipality, and the looting of millions of rands from the Greater Letaba Municipality's Driver's Licence Testing Centre. Several municipalities, such as Lephalale, have also seen officials arrested for corruption and bribery related to activities like selling driver's licenses. Improving service delivery in South African local government involves innovative approaches such as Integrated Development Planning, Local Economic Development, and the District Development Model. These strategies aim to address service delivery challenges and enhance governance.

This study welcomes the proposed revision of the white paper on local government, as introduced by the President of South Africa, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa, during the State of the Nation (SONA) address in 2025. The study believes that revising the 1998 White Paper on Local Government presents a crucial opportunity to enhance service delivery in South Africa by addressing systemic challenges that have hindered municipal effectiveness over the past 30 years. A refreshed policy framework can enhance the responsiveness of local governments, ensuring the timely and efficient provision of essential services, such as water, sanitation, and electricity. Strengthening financial management will promote fiscal responsibility, transparency, and sustainability, enabling municipalities to allocate resources more effectively for community development. Additionally, a renewed focus on capacity building will equip municipalities with the necessary skills and resources to adapt to emerging challenges. By fostering greater community engagement and participatory governance, the revised White Paper will empower citizens, ensuring their needs and aspirations shape local decision-making. Ultimately, this policy refresh has the potential to create more accountable, efficient, and responsive municipalities, driving sustainable development and strengthening South Africa's democracy. The IDP is a strategic framework that enables municipalities to effectively plan and manage development within their areas (Mathebula, Nkuna, & Sebola, 2016). Its primary goal is to harmonise various development objectives to enhance service delivery (Kgobe, Bayat, & Karriem, 2023; Mpolweni, Kabange, & Fagbadebo, 2024). However, its effectiveness is often compromised by challenges such as limited community participation, inadequate resource allocation, and a lack of planning expertise. The successful implementation of the IDP requires robust public involvement to ensure that the community's needs are addressed and to mitigate the risk of service delivery protests (Kgobe et al., 2023).

Local Economic Development is a strategic approach that fosters economic growth and enhances the quality of life in communities through collaboration among public enterprises, civil society, and the private sector (Meena, 2023). It has gained prominence as a response to global economic challenges, emphasising local initiatives for job creation and

service delivery (Qwabe & Zondi, 2020; Pilusa & Shipalana, 2020). However, the lack of social innovation integration limits its impact on service delivery (Lues, 2016). LED promotes equitable and sustainable growth by utilising local resources, creating employment opportunities, and reducing poverty, particularly in rural areas (Meena, 2023). In South Africa, challenges in LED planning include addressing structural adjustments and improving local competitiveness (Rogerson, 2010). Diversifying economic policies for resilience also remains a critical challenge in urban areas. The District Development Model (DDM) in South Africa is a strategic framework to enhance service delivery and foster economic development at the district level (Academy of Science of South Africa & Department of Science and Innovation, 2022). It promotes a collaborative approach, integrating efforts across government departments and stakeholders to effectively address local challenges (Bodley, Lloyd & Zeelie, 2023). The DDM is crucial for enhancing governance, fostering local economic development, and promoting innovation and inclusivity, which are essential for sustainable growth and reducing unemployment (Academy of Science of South Africa & Department of Science and Innovation, 2022; Bodley et al., 2023). It also provides a platform for stakeholder engagement towards common development goals (Mamokhere & Kgobe, 2023). However, the DDM faces challenges, including historical socio-spatial inequalities that hinder effective implementation (Mamokhere & Kgobe, 2023). It struggles with stabilising socio-spatial relations and addressing social inequalities. The success of the DDM relies on overcoming governance limitations and ensuring local needs are met, alongside a push for capacity development and innovation in district management (Kgobe, 2024).

To overcome the barriers caused by siloed operations, the study emphasises the importance of integrated planning and collaboration through frameworks such as the District Development Model (DDM) (CoGTA, 2023). This approach enhances interdepartmental coordination, aligns policies across government levels, and encourages the inclusion of diverse stakeholders in planning and implementation processes. Establishing collaborative governance structures and inclusive stakeholder networks can help ensure that development initiatives are coherent, efficient, and responsive to community needs (CoGTA, 2023). Resolving silo challenges requires promoting genuine collaboration, better policy alignment, integrated planning, and inclusive networking. Moving beyond isolated efforts to shared goals and trust-based partnerships among departments and stakeholders can improve coordination and resource utilisation. Policy alignment reduces duplication, while integrated planning ensures that LED initiatives are holistic and community-driven. Building inclusive networks among government, private sector, and civil society further strengthens information sharing and joint problem-solving, ultimately enhancing the sustainability and impact of LED initiatives.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This study analysed the evolving role of local government within South Africa's macroeconomic development agenda, focusing on governance structures, service delivery challenges, and institutional capacity. Through qualitative research methodology and a desktop approach, the findings reveal systemic issues such as inefficiencies, financial mismanagement, and capacity constraints as significant barriers to effective service delivery. The proposed revision of the 1998 White Paper on Local Government presents a crucial opportunity to enhance responsiveness and effectiveness in service delivery, which is essential for achieving broader socio-economic development goals. However, studying has its limitations. Firstly, it relies heavily on secondary sources, such as government reports and scholarly publications, which may limit the depth of insights into the real-time dynamics of local governance. Secondly, the geographical focus on South Africa may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts with different governance frameworks. Additionally, the analysis may not account for rapid changes in local governance and public administration policies that arise in response to socio-economic events, which can impact the relevance of the findings over time. Looking ahead, future research should concentrate on the practical implementation of proposed governance frameworks and assess their long-term impacts on service delivery effectiveness across various municipal contexts. Comparative studies between South Africa and other countries facing similar challenges could uncover best practices and innovative approaches to local governance. Furthermore, exploring community participation mechanisms can provide deeper insights into enhancing service delivery outcomes, emphasising the importance of citizen engagement in local governance processes. This study makes a significant contribution to the field of local governance by integrating theoretical perspectives from the Democratic Participatory, Efficiency Services, and Development Schools into its analysis. By providing actionable insights and policy recommendations, it enriches the existing literature on local governance reform. Moreover, by identifying key challenges such as systemic inefficiencies and capacity constraints, the research informs practitioners and policymakers about critical areas that require immediate attention, thereby improving the overall efficacy of local governments in South Africa.

Additionally, the research suggests several strategies to enhance service delivery in South Africa:

- Enhancing service delivery in South African local government needs a radical approach, including policy revisions and strategic planning frameworks. The proposed revision of the 1998 White Paper on Local Government by President Cyril Ramaphosa is crucial for addressing systemic inefficiencies, strengthening financial management, and enhancing community engagement and service delivery.
- There is a need to break down the working in silos in the three spheres of government and promote collaborative governance. The study promotes a well-coordinated IDP, LED and other government planning frameworks through the embracement of the DDM. The DDM improves coordination across government levels to improve governance and service delivery, though it must overcome socio-spatial inequalities and governance challenges. Together, these recommendations aim to create more responsive, efficient, and sustainable local governments.

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