

The Constitutional Promise vs. The Illiterate Reality: A Study of Oversight Failure in South African Municipalities

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Abstract: The constitutional and legislative framework of South Africa vests immense responsibility in municipal councils to ensure accountable governance and sustainable service delivery. This paper argues that a significant, yet under-examined, barrier to effective local governance is the high prevalence of adult illiteracy and low-level literacy among a portion of local councillors. Drawing on the principles of public administration, constitutional law, and governance theory, the paper contends that the inability of councillors to read, write, and comprehend complex documents like municipal budgets and reports critically impairs their capacity to exercise their oversight and legislative mandates. This deficiency transforms council proceedings from robust accountability mechanisms into ritualistic endorsements of executive (Mayoral Committee) proposals, fostering a culture of impunity, financial mismanagement, and a breakdown in the intergovernmental accountability chain.

Through a qualitative analysis of Auditor-General reports, case studies, and existing literature, this study reveals how illiteracy acts as a primary enabler of broader governance failures. The paper concludes by proposing a tripartite intervention strategy, including pre-candidacy screening, mandatory tailored literacy programmes, and enhanced deliberative tools, to bridge the gap between the formal powers of councils and the practical capacity to wield them effectively, arguing that this is not merely an administrative issue but a constitutional imperative for the survival of local democracy.

Keywords: Municipal Governance; Councillor Illiteracy; Fiscal Oversight; Oversight Failure; South Africa; Accountability Deficit.

Introduction

Local government is constitutionally mandated to be the frontline of service delivery in South Africa, tasked with providing "democratic and accountable government," ensuring services are provided to communities, and promoting social and economic development (Republic of South Africa, 1996a, s 152). The municipal council, as the elected political authority, is the central pillar of this system, wielding ultimate executive and legislative power with a specific duty to oversee the municipal executive and approve the municipal budget (De Visser, 2005). This intricate system of checks and balances, conceived during the democratic transition, was deliberately designed to prevent the recurrence of the authoritarianism and unchecked executive power that characterised the apartheid past and to establish a "culture of justification" at the most immediate level of the state (Mureinik, 1994, 32). In this culture, every exercise of power must be rationally justifiable to the citizens it affects.

However, the efficacy of this sophisticated system is predicated on a foundational, often tacitly assumed, competency: the functional literacy and numeracy of the councillors themselves. This paper addresses a critical vulnerability in South Africa's local governance architecture: the presence of a significant number of councillors who lack the functional literacy skills necessary to understand the very documents they are legally required to scrutinise, amend,

and adopt. As Stapenhurst (2011, 45) notes in a global context, "The best-designed accountability mechanisms are useless if the actors tasked with operating them lack the basic capacity to do so." This paper posits that adult illiteracy among councillors creates a fundamental and debilitating disconnect between constitutional intent and governance reality, rendering key oversight processes perfunctory and systematically undermining the social contract between citizens and the local state.

The crisis in local government, characterised by widespread financial distress and service delivery collapse, is empirically documented and stark. The Auditor-General's (2023, 9) consolidated report highlights a disheartening reality: only 38 out of 257 municipalities achieved a clean audit, while unsustainable expenditure (R.11 billion) and unauthorised expenditure (R.5.5 billion) remain rampant, indicating a profound breakdown in financial controls and accountability. While political interference, systemic corruption, and weak administrative capacity are frequently and rightly cited as primary causes (Southall, 2019; Atkinson, 2017), the elemental issue of councillor literacy remains a critical blind spot in both academic literature and formal policy responses. This paper seeks to illuminate this hidden deficit, arguing that it is not merely a symptom but a root cause that enables other pathologies to flourish by effectively disarming the primary agents of accountability, the councillors.

Understanding this complex problem requires a multi-disciplinary approach, situating it at the intersection of law, public administration, education policy, and political science. The analysis proceeds by first outlining the extensive legal and fiduciary duties of a councillor, then demonstrating through conceptual analysis and documented examples how illiteracy systematically undermines each of these duties. It subsequently explores the contributing socio-political and historical factors that perpetuate this problem, before concluding with a set of targeted, actionable recommendations. The central thesis is that without addressing this foundational capacity gap, other technical, procedural, and even political reforms to local government will have limited lasting impact, as the political leadership tasked with driving these reforms remains constitutionally incapable of utilising them effectively (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). This paper, therefore, contributes a new dimension to the analysis of local government failure in South Africa by placing the spotlight on the fundamental human capacity required to animate democratic institutions.

Literature Review

The crisis of municipal governance in South Africa has been extensively documented, yet the specific role of councillor literacy as a fundamental determinant of oversight failure remains under-theorized and inadequately explored in existing scholarship. This review synthesizes literature across three intersecting domains: the constitutional design of local government, the political economy of oversight failure, and the educational foundations of democratic competence.

The Constitutional Design and Its Implementation Gap

The post-apartheid constitutional settlement established local government as a distinctive sphere with a developmental mandate (Republic of South Africa, 1996a). Scholars like De Visser (2005) have extensively analysed this framework, highlighting its ambition to create "developmental local government" that actively restructures and redistributes resources. The legal architecture, particularly the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA) and Municipal Systems Act, creates a sophisticated system of checks and balances, vesting significant power in councils to approve budgets and oversee executives (Republic of South Africa, 2000; 2003). This design presupposes a level of technical competence and engagement from councillors that the historical and social context does not guarantee. As Ajam (2010) argues, the technical complexity of the MFMA's performance-based budgeting creates significant cognitive demands that many councils struggle to meet, leading to a reliance on officials that undermines political oversight. The jurisprudence of the Constitutional Court, particularly in *EFF v Speaker* (2016), has reinforced that oversight is a non-negotiable constitutional duty, not a discretionary power. However, as Roux (2018) notes, this judicial enforcement, while crucial, is a reactive measure that cannot compensate for a systemic, pre-existing capacity deficit within the legislature itself.

The Political Economy of Oversight Failure

A substantial body of work explains municipal dysfunction through the lens of political economy. The dominant-party state, institutionalized by a closed-list proportional representation system, is identified as a primary cause (Booyesen, 2020; Southall, 2013). This system severs the accountability link between councillors and constituents, creating a perverse incentive structure where loyalty to the party hierarchy trumps constitutional duty (Lafleur & Moepya, 2022). The phenomenon of "comradely scrutiny," where internal party norms discourage robust public oversight, has been identified as a key informal institution that subverts formal rules (Calland, 2023; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). Furthermore, the pervasive corruption and "state capture" detailed in the Zondo Commission Report (2022) illustrate

how a lack of political will, can render oversight mechanisms inert. However, while these studies expertly diagnose the political suppression of oversight, they often treat the capacity of councillors as a secondary issue or a black box. The literature has not sufficiently asked the question, as to what happens to oversight when the agents tasked with its execution lack the most basic tool, literacy, to perform it?

The Gap: Literacy as a Foundational Democratic Competency

The critical gap in the literature lies at the intersection of education policy, public administration, and democratic theory. While the challenges of "capacity building" are routinely mentioned in policy documents like the SALGA (2021) reports, they are typically framed in terms of technical training on legislation and procedures, not foundational literacy. Coetzee's (2019) seminal work, *The Quiet Crisis*, is a notable exception, directly linking literacy levels to oversight effectiveness and arguing that illiteracy creates an informal hierarchy of knowledge within councils. This paper builds on Coetzee's foundation by integrating it with the broader political and constitutional analysis.

The historical roots of this literacy deficit are well-documented in the educational literature. The deliberate under-education of Black South Africans through the Bantu Education system created an intergenerational legacy of low literacy that directly impacts the contemporary candidate pool for local government (Christie, 2019). As Levy and van Donk (2021) demonstrate in their study of provincial governance, the communities most in need of competent governance are often least equipped to supply it from within, creating a vicious cycle. This paper argues that this educational legacy is not a separate social issue but a core governance problem. It positions literacy not as a generic skill but as a meta-capacity, a foundational competency that enables the effective use of formal powers, leverages institutional capacity, and is a prerequisite for the exercise of genuine, independent political will. By synthesizing these disparate literatures, this study offers a more holistic explanation for oversight failure, moving the debate beyond politics and into the foundational capacities required for democracy to function.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing an in-depth case study methodology to investigate the phenomenon of councillor illiteracy and its impact on oversight. A qualitative approach is deemed most appropriate as it facilitates a deep, nuanced understanding of a complex social phenomenon within its real-life context, focusing on the "how" and "why" of the oversight failure (Yin, 2018).

Research Design and Case Selection

The research adopts a single, holistic case study design, with the "case" being the system of municipal council oversight in South Africa, with a specific focus on the role of councillor literacy as a critical variable. This macro-level case is then illuminated through the analysis of embedded units of analysis, including legislative frameworks, Auditor-General reports, and documented examples from specific municipalities mentioned in public reports and existing literature. This approach allows for a multi-faceted exploration of the problem across different contexts while maintaining a cohesive analytical focus (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The VBS Bank scandal (Motau, 2018) is used not as the primary case but as a critical, revelatory instance within the larger case study to illustrate the operationalization of the theoretical framework in a high-stakes, real-world context.

Data Collection and Sources

The study relies on documentary analysis of secondary sources, a method that involves the systematic review and interpretation of existing texts to provide an account of a specific social phenomenon (Bowen, 2009). This method was selected due to the sensitivity of the topic, which makes direct access to illiterate councillors for interviews ethically and practically challenging.

The data corpus for this study comprises a multi-faceted collection of documentary sources to ensure a comprehensive analysis. The study analyses a purposively selected sample of key documents deemed most authoritative and relevant to the research problem. This includes the foundational normative framework established through primary legal documents, namely the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), the Municipal Structures Act (1998), the Municipal Systems Act (2000), and the Municipal Finance Management Act (2003). Empirical, objective data on municipal performance is drawn from official audit reports, particularly the most recent Auditor-General's Consolidated General Report (2023), which audits all 257 municipalities, and which serves as a key indicator of oversight failure. Furthermore, landmark judicial opinions, such as *Economic Freedom Fighters v Speaker of the National Assembly* (2016), are analysed to provide authoritative interpretation of the legal obligations of legislative bodies. The investigation is theoretically grounded and contextualised through engagement with scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles from public administration, political science, law, and education. Finally, detailed

forensic accounts of specific oversight failures are incorporated from commissioned reports and investigations, such as the "Great Bank Heist" report on the VBS Mutual Bank (Motau, 2018), offering a critical, revelatory case study. The rationale for this purposive sample is that these sources collectively provide the necessary legal, empirical, academic, and practical depth to construct a holistic and credible analysis of a systemic governance issue, where breadth is less critical than the richness and authority of the evidence.

Data Analysis

The data was subjected to a qualitative content analysis, which involves a systematic coding and categorisation process to identify patterns, themes, and relationships (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The analysis was guided by the theoretical framework of the oversight triad (Pelizzo & Stapenhurst, 2012), with codes developed deductively based on the concepts of formal powers, institutional capacity, and political will. The data was then analysed to see how the variable of illiteracy impacted each of these pillars. For example, evidence of councillors failing to understand budget documents was coded under "erosion of institutional capacity," while instances of relying on party whips were coded under "suppression of political will." This structured analysis allowed for a systematic exploration of the research problem across the diverse data sources.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

As a study based on documentary analysis, key ethical considerations include the accurate representation and citation of sources to avoid plagiarism and misrepresentation. The analysis of councillor illiteracy is conducted with sensitivity to avoid stigmatising individuals, framing the issue as a systemic and historical problem rather than one of individual failing. A primary limitation of this methodology is the reliance on secondary sources, which may not capture the lived, subjective experiences of councillors themselves. Furthermore, the clandestine nature of illiteracy means its prevalence is difficult to quantify precisely. To mitigate the potential internal biases, present in any single documentary source, such as the political framing in a commission report or the specific audit focus of the Auditor General, the study employs methodical triangulation (Bowen, 2009). By analysing and cross-referencing data from four distinct source types (legal, audit, academic, and investigative), the study seeks to identify convergent patterns of evidence. This process allows for the construction of a corroborated argument that is not dependent on any single potentially biased narrative, thereby enhancing the analytical validity of the findings. However, the triangulation of multiple data sources, legal, audit, academic, and investigative, helps to mitigate this limitation and build a robust, corroborated argument (Bowen, 2009).

Theoretical Framework: The Triad of Effective Oversight

To fully grasp the impact of illiteracy, it is essential to situate it within a broader theoretical framework of what enables effective legislative oversight. This paper adapts and applies the classic triad of oversight determinants, formal powers, institutional capacity, and political will (Pelizzo & Stapenhurst, 2012), to the local government context, positing that literacy is the foundational substrate upon which these three pillars rest.

Formal Powers: The Architecture of Accountability

South African local government is not lacking in formal powers. The Constitution and accompanying legislation bestow upon municipal councils a formidable arsenal of oversight tools. These include the power to approve budgets and policies, summon officials, conduct inquiries, and pass motions of no confidence (Republic of South Africa, 1998; 2003). The Constitutional Court has repeatedly affirmed that these are not discretionary powers but constitutional imperatives (*Economic Freedom Fighters v Speaker of the National Assembly*, 2016). From an institutional theory perspective, these formal rules are designed to constrain behaviour and ensure accountability (North, 1990). However, as this paper will demonstrate, these powers exist only on paper for a councillor who cannot read the documents that trigger their use or comprehend the procedures for their application. The formal architecture of accountability, however robust, becomes a hollow shell.

Institutional Capacity: The Machinery of Scrutiny

Institutional capacity refers to the resources, information, and expertise available to a legislature to perform its functions (Stapenhurst et al., 2016). This includes trained support staff, research services, financial for oversight, and access to information. In South Africa, institutions like the Auditor-General and the Parliamentary Budget Office are designed to augment this capacity. However, the first and most crucial node of institutional capacity is the individual councillor. No amount of external support can compensate for a councillor's inability to process information. Literacy is the primary tool for data intake, analysis, and synthesis. Without it, the broader institutional capacity is rendered

irrelevant at the point of decision-making. The councillor becomes a broken link in the accountability chain, unable to leverage the machinery of scrutiny built to support them.

Political Will: The Engine of Accountability

Political will is often cited as the decisive variable in the oversight triad (Booyesen, 2020). It is the motivation to act. However, the concept of political will must be disentangled. We can distinguish between *collective political will* (the stance of the ruling party caucus) and *individual political will* (the motivation of a single councillor to perform their duties). Illiteracy directly eviscerates individual political will. A councillor who is aware of their inability to understand proceedings is likely to disengage, defer to others, or retreat into passive compliance. The fear of exposure and humiliation suppresses any intrinsic motivation to scrutinize and challenge. Thus, illiteracy does not just coexist with a lack of political will; it actively cultivates and enforces it at the individual level, which aggregates into collective inaction.

In this adapted framework, literacy is not a separate category but a *meta-capacity* that enables the effective use of formal powers, amplifies institutional capacity, and is a prerequisite for the exercise of genuine political will. When this meta-capacity is absent, the entire triad collapses, and oversight fails. This theoretical lens provides a structured way to analyse the specific failures detailed in the following sections.

The Constitutional and Legislative Mandate of a Councillor

A councillor's role, far from being a ceremonial position, is embedded with significant legal duties that demand a high level of cognitive engagement and analytical capability. The *Local Government: Municipal Structures Act* (Republic of South Africa, 1998, s 50) mandates that a councillor must provide "direction and oversight" regarding the affairs of the municipality, a deceptively simple phrase that implies proactive, informed, and critical leadership. Crucially, the MFMA places the budget at the centre of council's work, requiring it to consider, amend, and approve this technically complex document which serves as the municipality's primary financial and service delivery plan (Republic of South Africa, 2003, Chapter 4). This is not a passive act of rubber-stamping; it is an active legislative function that requires the ability to interrogate assumptions, evaluate trade-offs, assess value-for-money, and hold the executive directly accountable for its financial proposals and their subsequent implementation (Ajam, 2010).

This function is a direct operationalisation of the foundational constitutional principle of a "multi-party system of democratic government, to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness" (Republic of South Africa, 1996a, s 1(d)). The legal framework further imposes a stringent fiduciary duty on councillors to act in the municipality's best interest, a duty that demands the exercise of "care, diligence and skill" (Republic of South Africa, 2003, s 62). This fiduciary role, akin to that of a company director towards its shareholders, is impossible to fulfil without functional literacy, as it necessitates actively engaging with, critically analysing, and challenging complex written information, from multi-year budgets and audited financial statements to performance audits and legal opinions.

Beyond the budget, councillors are legally required to adopt and oversee the implementation of the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), a strategic five-year plan that spatially and financially links municipal resources to long-term developmental objectives. They must also pass by-laws (local legislation that carries the force of law), monitor the performance of the municipal manager and Section 57 employees and represent the interests of their constituents in council debates (Republic of South Africa, 2000). Each of these functions involves processing and generating sophisticated written information, from complex legal drafts and contractual documents to detailed performance reports and constituency submissions. The *Municipal Systems Act* explicitly mandates that councils must "promote a culture of performance management" (Republic of South Africa, 2000, s 38), a culture that is unattainable if the political leadership cannot decipher the performance data, key performance indicators, and strategic objectives upon which managerial and policy decisions are based.

Jurisprudence from the highest courts underscores the seriousness, non-negotiable nature, and legal enforceability of these obligations. The Constitutional Court has held that legislative oversight is not a discretionary power but a constitutional imperative, a necessary function in a system of checks and balances designed to prevent the abuse of power (*Economic Freedom Fighters v Speaker of the National Assembly*, 2016). While this landmark judgment pertained directly to the national sphere, its logic, rooted in foundational constitutional principles, applies with equal force to local government. The failure of a municipal council to hold its executive accountable, therefore, is not merely a political or administrative failing; it constitutes a violation of its own statutory duties and compromises the entire intergovernmental system. It directly impedes the state's overarching ability to fulfil its positive duties, particularly the progressive realisation of socio-economic rights like housing, water, and healthcare as outlined in the Bill of Rights, as effective local government is the primary delivery mechanism for these rights.

The Oversight Deficit: From Scrutiny to Ritual

The inability to read and comprehend complex texts transforms the critical oversight process from a substantive, evidence-based check on power into a hollow, ritualistic performance of accountability, with several cascading and deeply damaging consequences for governance, service delivery, and public trust (Chikane, 2022).

The Budget as an Incomprehensible Document

For an illiterate or low-literate councillor, the municipal budget, a document often exceeding hundreds of pages of dense tables, technical terminology, and accounting standards, is not a tool for planning and accountability but an impenetrable and intimidating artifact. They cannot independently verify figures, assess the alignment of expenditure with IDP goals, identify potentially wasteful, inefficient, or corrupt allocations hidden within its line items, or understand the implications of conditional grants and their requirements (Ajam, 2010). This fundamental incapacity forces an almost total and unquestioning reliance on the very executive officials (the Mayor, MMCs, and the Chief Financial Officer), they are constitutionally mandated to oversee and challenge. As a result, crucial budget votes, which should be the climax of rigorous scrutiny and debate, can become mere formalities, with councillors voting on a document they do not understand based on political assurances and party directives they are not equipped to evaluate critically.

This reliance creates a profound and debilitating information asymmetry that the executive can easily and often deliberately exploit. A Mayor or MMC, supported by administrative officials, can present a budget with a veneer of technical complexity, using specialised jargon, acronyms, and financial terminology to obscure problematic allocations, defund key service delivery priorities, or embed provisions that benefit narrow political or private interests (Coetzee, 2019). An illiterate councillor has no recourse but to accept these explanations at face value, effectively transferring the council's legislative power of the purse to the executive. The budget process, instead of being a platform for democratic deliberation, public justification, and the assertion of public priorities, becomes a technocratic tool for centralising power, evading meaningful scrutiny, and legitimising pre-determined outcomes.

The consequences of this dynamic are tangible, severe, and borne directly by communities. The Auditor-General's reports consistently cite unauthorised, irregular, and fruitless and wasteful expenditure, often stemming from deviations, procurement irregularities, and poor planning that were either embedded in the initial budget or could have been identified and challenged during a rigorous, line-by-line approval process (Auditor-General, 2023). A literate and numerate council could theoretically identify these red flags during the approval stage through probing questions and analysis; an illiterate one only discovers the problems months or years later via the AG's report, by which time public funds are irretrievably lost, infrastructure projects have failed, and critical service delivery has suffered, exacerbating poverty and social inequality. The inability to conduct pre-emptive, granular scrutiny thus has a direct and devastating impact on municipal finances and the constitutional rights of citizens, particularly the poor and marginalised.

The Erosion of Executive Oversight

The oversight of Mayoral Committee Members (MMCs) and the municipal manager is similarly crippled by literacy deficits. Without the ability to read and comprehend quarterly performance reports, annual reports, investigative reports, and oversight committee findings, the capacity of councillors to ask probing, evidence-based, and follow-up questions is severely limited. Oversight then inevitably shifts from substantive issues of financial management, policy effectiveness, administrative performance, and legal compliance to superficial political grandstanding, partisan point-scoring, or worse, complete acquiescence to the executive's self-serving narrative (Cameron, 2019). This dynamic entrenches executive dominance and fundamentally undermines the system of checks and balances, creating an environment ripe for maladministration, patronage, and corruption, as there is no effective, internally situated political counterweight to question authority.

This erosion of oversight fosters a deep-seated culture of impunity within the municipal administration. When officials and political principals realise that their reports, explanations, and performance data will not be seriously challenged, deconstructed, or independently verified by the political oversight body, the incentive for diligent performance management, accurate reporting, and transparent conduct diminishes significantly (Atkinson, 2017). They may submit vague, incomplete, delayed, or deliberately misleading reports with confidence, knowing they will face no meaningful consequences in the council chamber. This breaks the essential feedback loop between policy implementation and political oversight, allowing poor performance, inefficiency, and misconduct to go unchecked and uncorrected, ultimately becoming institutionalised and normalized within the municipality's culture.

Furthermore, the legally mandated public participation process, a cornerstone of cooperative governance, is rendered largely meaningless. Councillors are meant to be the primary conduit and translator through which community concerns, needs, experiences, and proposals are channelled into formal council proceedings and transformed into actionable motions, questions, and policy adjustments. An illiterate councillor cannot effectively compile written submissions from constituents, research complex local issues, analyse service delivery data, or draft formal, precise, and legally sound questions or motions for council consideration (Piper & Deacon, 2009). This disempowers not only the councillor but the entire community they represent, severing a vital link in the chain of accountability and deepening public cynicism, alienation, and frustration towards local government institutions, which are increasingly perceived as distant, unresponsive, and self-serving.

The Delegation of Core Responsibilities and the Rise of Gatekeepers

In practice, illiterate councillors are often compelled, either by necessity or party pressure, to delegate their analytical and scrutiny responsibilities to more literate colleagues, party whips, or sympathetic support staff. While pragmatically understandable, this widespread practice violates the principle of individual fiduciary duty that each councillor independently holds towards their electorate. It also creates unhealthy and opaque power dynamics within the council where a small, literate minority, a de facto inner circle of "gatekeepers", effectively controls the legislative agenda, the interpretation of complex information, and ultimately, the oversight outcomes and political direction of the municipality (Coetzee, 2019). This is a direct subversion of representative democracy, as the councillor is no longer exercising their own informed judgement on behalf of their constituents but is acting as a mere proxy or voting number for others who are not democratically accountable to that ward or community.

This internal delegation creates a stark, two-tiered council: a small, empowered group of "gatekeepers" who understand and manipulate the business of the municipality and a larger, politically passive and dependent group who are marginalised from real decision-making. The gatekeepers, often the Mayor, Chief Whip, or chairperson of the powerful Finance Committee, amass significant informal power, becoming the sole interpreters of a complex administrative and financial reality for the rest of the caucus (Booyesen, 2020). This undermines the principle of collective, deliberative decision-making and can easily turn the council from a democratic institution into a vehicle for the interests of a dominant faction within the ruling party, systematically sidelining broader public interest considerations, minority views, and constituency-specific needs.

The ethical and legal risks of this dependency are severe and far-reaching. A councillor who blindly follows the guidance of a party whip or senior official without independent comprehension is constitutionally incapable of providing genuine "direction and oversight." They become a susceptible voting bloc, vulnerable to manipulation and co-option into corrupt schemes. In cases of grand corruption or systemic maladministration, such as those detailed in the State Capture Commission reports or the VBS Bank scandal, such a councillor cannot credibly claim they were unaware of malfeasance that was documented in reports, AG findings, or forensic investigations they could not read; their illiteracy becomes symptomatic of a deeper failure to discharge their legal and ethical obligations to the public, potentially implicating them in the very failures they were constitutionally mandated to prevent.

Contributing Factors and Compounding Realities

This critical problem is not an isolated phenomenon but is exacerbated and perpetuated by a confluence of South Africa's unique political, educational, and historical context, which creates a perfect storm that ensures the continued selection and incapacity of illiterate councillors.

The Candidate Selection Process in a Dominant-Party System

The closed-list proportional representation system used in local elections strategically places the power of candidate selection firmly in the hands of political party hierarchies and internal structures, rather than with the electorate directly, severing the direct accountability link between councillor and voter (Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2014). In the context of South Africa's dominant-party system, where the African National Congress (ANC) has maintained a decisive majority in most municipalities since 1994, parties often prioritise political loyalty, internal patronage networks, and demographic representation (e.g., balancing gender, age, and ethnic backgrounds) over functional competencies like literacy, analytical skill, and critical thinking (Booyesen, 2020). The incentive structure at play is profoundly perverse: a loyal but illiterate councillor who will not challenge the party line or embarrass the leadership is often seen as more politically manageable, predictable, and therefore valuable than an independent-minded, literate one who could cause internal friction, expose executive failures, or build an independent public profile that challenges the party machine.

The internal politics of candidate selection at the volatile branch level often reward mobilisation, network-building, factional allegiance, and loyalty to specific "slates" over technical competence or educational attainment (Lafleur & Moepya, 2022). A potential councillor's ability to mobilise votes, control branch meetings, and demonstrate unwavering loyalty at a party nomination conference may far outweigh their capacity to understand municipal finance, public administration, or legislative drafting. This reflects a broader challenge in dominant-party systems globally, where internal party accountability and discipline frequently trump the formal-legal responsibilities of public office, as the party becomes the primary locus of power and career advancement (Southall, 2013). The result is that the very design of the electoral system, combined with these entrenched party-political practices, systematically filters individuals with significant literacy challenges into positions where literacy is an absolute, non-negotiable prerequisite for effective performance and constitutional compliance.

Inadequate, Misplaced, and Stigmatising Induction and Training

While the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) provides standardized, national induction programmes for new councillors, these are often too brief, too generic, and too superficial to address the profound and deeply rooted literacy deficits that some incoming councillors possess (SALGA, 2021). A typical two-week crash course on the intricacies of the MFMA, municipal law, and council procedures is fundamentally futile and alienating for a participant who struggles to read the course materials, comprehend basic numerical data, or write a coherent sentence. The dominant training model typically focuses on transmitting the "what" of local government, the laws, structures, and procedures, not the foundational "how" of basic comprehension, critical analysis, logical reasoning, and financial literacy, which are the true prerequisites for understanding the "what."

Moreover, there is a powerful social, cultural, and political stigma attached to admitting illiteracy or low literacy, particularly in a competitive, often macho political environment where perceived weakness or lack of education can be ruthlessly exploited by rivals for factional advantage. Councillors may actively hide their lack of understanding during council meetings, committee sessions, and training workshops rather than seek help, for fear of being labelled incompetent, being ridiculed, or, most consequentially, being sidelined for future positions or removed from the party list in the next election (Atkinson, 2017). This creates a silent, shameful, and self-perpetuating crisis, where the problem is widely known anecdotally among officials and colleagues but is rarely acknowledged, systematically measured, or compassionately addressed through official channels. Without mandatory, confidential, non-punitive, and compassionate literacy and numeracy assessments as an integral and normalised part of the induction and ongoing support process, multi-million-rand training programmes are doomed to be misdirected, wasteful, and completely ineffective for those councillors who need them most, thereby perpetuating the cycle of incapacity.

The Enduring Socio-Economic Legacy of Bantu Education

The problem is a direct and painful legacy of the apartheid-era Bantu Education system, which was deliberately designed by the National Party government to provide an inferior, "gutter education" to Black South Africans, aiming to prepare them only for menial labour and perpetual subservience, not for critical thought, civic leadership, or democratic citizenship (Christie, 2019). The demographic profile of many rural, township, and historically marginalised municipalities means that the pool of potential councillors inevitably includes individuals from older generations who were direct victims of this destructive, purposeful system of intellectual stunting. This historical injustice means that the contemporary literacy deficit in councils is not a random social outcome or a reflection of individual failing, but a lingering, intergenerational consequence of a deliberate, state-sanctioned policy of under-education, cultural denigration, and intellectual disempowerment, the effects of which continue to haunt the institutions of democracy decades after apartheid's formal end.

This deep historical legacy intersects starkly with contemporary socio-economic realities and spatial inequalities. In many poor, rural, and historically marginalised municipalities, the overall adult literacy rate is low, the quality of public schooling remains abysmal, and the local economy offers limited formal sector opportunities that would naturally foster the financial, administrative, and analytical literacy required for effective governance. Consequently, the pool of highly literate, confident, critically thinking, and experienced potential candidates may be exceedingly small, and those individuals who do possess these attributes are often drawn to more lucrative, stable, and professionally supportive careers in the private sector, national government, or civil society (Levy & van Donk, 2021). This creates a profound structural problem: the communities most in need of capable, competent, and critical governance are often the very communities least equipped, due to historical and ongoing, racially defined inequalities, to provide it from within their own ranks, creating a vicious and self-reinforcing cycle of underdevelopment, poor governance, and service delivery failure that the post-apartheid state has struggled to break.

Case Study: The VBS Bank Heist – Oversight Failure in Action

The looting of the VBS Mutual Bank, which led to its collapse in 2018 with losses of nearly R2 billion, serves as a stark, tangible case study that illustrates how councillor illiteracy and incapacity can directly enable grand corruption. A forensic report by advocate Terry Motau, titled "The Great Bank Heist," explicitly detailed how over 50 municipalities, predominantly in Limpopo, North-West, and Gauteng, illegally invested public funds into VBS, in direct violation of the MFMA (Motau, 2018).

In this scenario, the oversight failure was multi-layered. For a council to approve such an investment, it required a council resolution. The proposals brought before these councils were often dressed in complex financial jargon, promising high, guaranteed returns. Many councillors, lacking the financial literacy to understand the inherent risks, the illegal nature of the investment, or the basic principles of public finance management, relied on the recommendations of municipal managers, treasurers, and mayors, many of whom were themselves complicit or had been bribed (Southall, 2019). The inability to independently scrutinise the investment proposal, understand the accompanying legal opinions, or question the too-good-to-be-true returns meant that the council's approval was reduced to a ritual. They were signing off on a decision they did not comprehend, based on trust in corrupted executives.

The aftermath further revealed the oversight deficit. When the bank collapsed and the scandal broke, many of these councils were unable to effectively hold their executives to account. They could not decipher the complex Motau report, understand the flow of funds, or launch effective internal investigations. Their illiteracy made them vulnerable not just to the initial corruption but also paralysed them in the face of its exposure. This case demonstrates that illiteracy is not a passive condition but an active enabler of looting, as it neutralises the very institution designed to be the first line of defence against the misuse of public funds.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The presence of a significant number of illiterate and low-literate councillors in South African municipalities is not merely an administrative or educational challenge; it is a profound governance failure that strikes at the very root of accountable, democratic, and developmental local government. It creates a dangerous and deceptive democratic façade where impressive formal oversight structures, world-class legislation, and lofty constitutional promises are maintained on the surface but are systematically drained of their substantive power and purpose from within, directly contributing to the well-documented crises of financial collapse, systemic corruption, and service delivery failures that relentlessly erode public trust and fuel social unrest (Auditor-General, 2023; Southall, 2019).

Addressing this entrenched, sensitive, and multifaceted challenge requires moving beyond ad hoc technical fixes and confronting it directly with a suite of politically courageous, constitutionally grounded, and practically feasible interventions. The conclusions and recommendations presented herein are derived from a qualitative analysis of triangulated sources. While the sensitivity of the topic precludes direct empirical measurement, the consistent emergence of the literacy-capacity theme across disparate, high-authority documents (from constitutional jurisprudence to forensic reports) provides a robust foundation for the argument. The proposed interventions flow directly from this diagnosed systemic failure. The following tripartite strategy is proposed:

Firstly, the pre-candidacy screening and the ethical responsibility of political parties: Political parties, as the primary gatekeepers of public office and the engines of candidate selection, must be legally and morally compelled to exercise greater ethical and fiduciary responsibility towards the public. This should involve the mandatory implementation of confidential, standardised, and fair basic literacy, numeracy, and cognitive assessment tests as a non-negotiable criterion for candidate selection for local government elections. To support this and ensure national standardisation and fairness, the National Treasury and the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) should collaboratively develop and provide a standardised, confidential assessment tool for all parties to use. This intervention is not aimed at unjustified exclusion but at ensuring a minimum, non-partisan competency threshold for one of the most critical public offices, thereby protecting the integrity, functionality, and credibility of the local state and fulfilling the constitutional duty to provide effective governance.

Secondly, mandatory, intensive, and contextually tailored literacy programmes: For sitting councillors, the state, through a partnership between SALGA and CoGTA, must institute mandatory, accredited, intensive, and long-term adult basic education and training (ABET) programmes specifically tailored for the unique demands of the local government context. This must be framed and resourced not as a punitive or stigmatising measure but as a core, non-negotiable, and prestigious capacity-building investment in the country's governance infrastructure. These programmes must be strictly confidential, offered during official working hours with appropriate stipends, and

crucially, must use actual municipal documents, draft budgets, IDPs, AG reports, by-law drafts, as the primary teaching aids and curriculum foundation to ensure immediate relevance, practical application, and rapid skill transfer to the councillor's daily work.

Third, enhanced visual, oral, and deliberative oversight tools: As an immediate, complementary, and empowering measure, municipal administrations should be formally mandated by amendments to council rules of order to present all complex financial and performance information in simplified, visual, and accessible formats (e.g., interactive dashboards, infographics, clear charts, pictograms). Furthermore, council rules and procedures should be amended to mandate, protect, and incentivise more robust, structured, and extended oral questioning sessions, and to require that all major reports tabled before council be accompanied by a detailed, stand-alone executive summary written in plain, accessible language. This would provide immediate relief, lower the barrier to entry for participation, improve the overall quality and inclusivity of deliberation, and empower a broader range of councillors to participate meaningfully in their oversight roles, even as they concurrently work to improve their foundational literacy and numeracy skills.

Ultimately, for local government to fulfil its transformative constitutional promise and become the engine of development and democracy it was designed to be, the individuals entrusted with its considerable powers must possess the fundamental cognitive tools to wield them effectively, responsibly, and accountably. A councillor who cannot read is, in effect, disenfranchised from their own governance role and, in turn, disenfranchises the community they represent, betraying the very essence of representative democracy. Bridging this literacy gap is therefore not just an educational or administrative imperative, but a constitutional one, essential for rescuing local government from its current protracted crisis and for rebuilding a credible, accountable, and effective state that can truly serve and empower the people of South Africa.

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