

An Exploration of Reasons Behind Service Delivery Protests in South Africa: A Case of Bolobedu South at the Greater Tzaneen Municipality

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Abstract: This paper aimed at exploring the underlying reasons behind municipal service delivery protests at Greater Tzaneen Local Municipality. South African municipalities also form part of concerned public entities in terms of service delivery backlogs and protests behind service delivery. Over the past few years, South Africa has experienced a large number of protests against poor and insufficient service delivery across most municipalities in various provinces. Therefore, an increase in service delivery protests in South African municipalities, as regularly seen in various media platforms such as newspapers, television and social media makes it necessary for policy-makers, government practitioners and scholars to understand the underlying factors behind service delivery protests. This paper also intended to explore if whether community members protest due to poor or sufficient service delivery. It is quite evident that some people take advantage of the protests to their best interests rather than protesting for better service delivery. To accomplish the aim of this paper, a desktop research approach was applied to validated the argument and to uncover the underlying factors of service delivery protests. From the literature perspective, it is discovered that unemployment, poverty and lack of access to information, political instability, corruption, nepotism and lack of public participatory are underlying factors behind service delivery protests. Despite some of the success of the post-apartheid South African government, the country still faces some serious challenges of high unemployment, poverty, inequality and political instability. These are some of the key factors which culminate in citizens on streets protesting or expressing their dissatisfaction over the problem of poor service delivery.

Keywords: Dissatisfaction, Poverty, Protests, Service delivery, Unemployment

1. Introduction

Service delivery remains one of the major challenges of the 21st century. Service delivery protests are not uncommon around the world especially in those countries where public service delivery remains a challenge. At Yemen in Asia, during 2012, the country experienced protests coupled with road blockages by citizens demanding lower fuel prices and increased supply of electricity. There were also widespread protests against government and security officials accused of corruption (Akinboade, Mokwena & Kinfack, 2014:10). In South Africa, protesting is not a new phenomenon nor is it a phenomenon which is unique. As early as the 1700's for instance, during the French revolution, citizens protested against perceived injustices perpetrated by the governing elite against the poor and working class (Brown, 2017). Cases indicate that there is almost no country or continent which can claim that they have not experienced some form of unrest or violent protests by citizens. Therefore, citizens have been involved on service delivery protests because

they were no longer satisfied with the status quo of service provision or about the undelivered promises of the elected government. In this regard, South Africa has seen both, violent and non-violent protests, prior and post first democratically elected government (Brown, 2017:3).

Service provision is a constitutional obligation in terms of section 152 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, which lay obligations to the municipalities that the objects of local government are: (a) to provide democratic and accountable government for local communities; (b) to ensure the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner; (c) to promote social and economic development; (d) to promote a safe and healthy environment; and (e) to encourage the involvement of communities and community organizations in the matters of local government (Constitution of Republic of South Africa, 1996). Therefore, South African municipalities are legal obliged to ensure the provision services as enshrined by the constitution. Mathebula (2014) indicates that most

service delivery protests have been about unfulfilled objects of local government which often leads to community members on street demanding for the provision of services to communities.

According to Burger (2009), there are various reasons which contribute to service delivery protests within the jurisdiction of South African municipalities, including at Greater Tzaneen Local Municipality. The first reason behind service delivery protests is dissatisfaction of delivery of basic municipal services such as clean running water, electricity and toilets, especially in rural settlements. Another reason includes the unemployment rate which is officially at around 27%, high levels of poverty, poor infrastructures such as road, health facilities and lack of houses (StatsSA, 2018). These matters add to the growing dissatisfaction in South African communities and generally lead to many socio-economic challenges such as high levels of crime and diseases. These issues have become in the wake of political promises from 1994 elections, whereby people were promised that all and most of these will be addressed once the new government is placed into power. To some protesters, unfulfilled promises have been recurring in every election since 1994. Most of these service delivery protests have also turned violent whereby criminals are taking advantage of the situation (Burger, 2009).

This paper explored variety of factors underlying service delivery protests in South African municipalities, with particular reference to Greater Tzaneen Local Municipality. It is further evident that failure to render municipal goods and services could prompt impatient communities into rioting and protesting as a means of forcing the government to deliver (Shaidi, 2013). Therefore, it is paramount that a proper exploration into the root causes behind service delivery protests be launched. The paper applied qualitative research design to uncover trends in thoughts, opinions and to dive deeper into the problem. Qualitative research design was also deployed to allow the researcher an opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of the underlying reasons behind service delivery protests using Greater Tzaneen Local Municipality as a case of reference. In other words, a desktop research design was used to review documentation. According to Morudu (2017:2), an increase in service delivery protests in South African context, as regularly seen in various media platforms such as newspapers, television, social media such as Facebook, Twitter and

YouTube. These make it essential for policy-makers, scholars and government practitioners to know the underlying reasons behind service delivery protests. In truth, the reasons behind service delivery protests are normally poorly understood and this has raised many speculations on why protests occur and if indeed whether these protests are really about service delivery or not. Given a large number of protests that have occurred in the recent years South African's Provinces Municipalities, it is no astonishment that there is a mounting concern amongst the public as to why these protests are happening (Allan & Heese, 2004).

The South African municipalities have been seriously criticized for its poor administration which results in poor service delivery to the public. Fraud and corruption in the local government sphere and public service in general, remains a huge challenge for good governance in the public sector where huge sums of state funds go missing without being accounted for and state resources being utilised for personal gain. It is therefore evident that the public sector lacks an adequate reporting system to support good governance (Smit & Cronje, 2002:192). Service delivery has become a common problem in South Africa. Starting from Harrismith in Durban, Phulong in Free State and Diepsloot in Gauteng Province to Bolobedu South at Relela in Limpopo Province, endless service delivery protests have been undertaken by communities demanding for better and sufficient service provision (Department of Cooperative Governance, Human Settlement and Traditional Affairs, 2017:2). The presence of service delivery protests, especially violent ones, is a threat to South Africa's young democracy and its sustainability. (Maphumulo, 2016).

2. Conceptualisation of Service Delivery Protests in South African Context

In order to understand the service delivery protests as they are happening in South Africa, it is imperative to outline their meaning. Firstly, it is also paramount to understand what is meant by service delivery. Service delivery is concerned with the provision of products or services, by a government or a governmental body to a community that was promised or expected that services (Crous, 2004:19). In other words, service delivery can be seen as a common phrase in South Africa used to describe the distribution of basic needs that citizens depend on such

as water, electricity, sanitation infrastructure, health care, and housing (Chen, Dean, Frank & Kumar, 2014:1).

According to Shaidi (2013:16), Service delivery protests refer to community action through which the residents of an area decide to voice their dissatisfaction or grievances with the manner and scale at which public services are rendered to them. These protests could be either peaceful or violent. Naturally, Service delivery protests in South African municipalities are often characterized by violence and non-violence. Therefore, violent protests can be defined as those protests whereby protesters participate in physical acts that either causes instant harm to persons or damaging physical state properties (Dassah, 2012:21). Acts of violence include a range of practices such as blockading of major highways, erection of barricades, burring of tires, burning of public buildings such police station, clinics, Public libraries and politicians' houses, looting of shops, stoning of police officers and vehicles. While non-violent protests involve marches to hand over a memorandum of grievance or instances whereby protesters marches peacefully gathered in public area (Dassah, 2012:21).

Another reason why people protest is that they believe that protests receive a better response from responsible authorities than other means of engagement. Alexander (2010:25) further argues that there is existence belief that grievances or complaints expressed in the form of violent protest action stood a better chance to be addressed under Zuma's administration. For example, Relela protests campaign, only received attention after residents have expressed their complaints in some form of protests which lead to violence (Chiwarawara, 2014:32). Since 2004, South Africa has experienced a movement of local protests amounting to a rebellion of the poor. This has been widespread and intense, reaching insurrectionary proportions in some cases. On the surface, the protests have been about service delivery and against uncaring, self-serving, and corrupt leaders of municipalities. A key feature has been mass participation by a new generation of fighters, particularly unemployed youth but also school students (Alexander, 2010:25).

3. Factors Contributing to Municipal Service Delivery Protests

There are various reasons underlying to service delivery protests in South Africa. However, this

paper explored number of reasons behind service provision which includes; dissatisfaction with service delivery, unemployment and poverty, lack of access to information, lack of public participatory, political instability and unfulfilled promises as they are discussed as below.

3.1 Dissatisfaction with Service Delivery

Mathebula (2014:107) indicate that slow pace of service delivery and dissatisfaction with municipal performance with regards to water and sanitation, electricity, housing and other basic services leads to the community on street protesting for the basic rights as enshrined by the Constitution of Republic of South Africa 1996, through the Bill of Rights. According to Burger (2009), there are many reasons for protests in South Africa. The primary reason is dissatisfaction with the delivery of basic municipal services such as running water, electricity and toilets, especially in rural and informal settlements. Unemployment (officially at around 27%), high levels of poverty, poor infrastructure, and the lack of houses add to the growing dissatisfaction (StatsSA, 2018). According to Akinboade *et al.* (2014:2), indicates that community dissatisfaction with public service delivery in South African municipalities has started to experience a rash of service delivery protests in recent years. From 2007 onwards, the poor performance of public representative as well as the dysfunctionality of local government administrative structures has been the main crucial points of anger, directing the community to protests over service provision.

3.2 Unemployment and Poverty

Allen and Thomas (1992:56) explain that unemployment means being without work or working without being paid. According to Nematili (2006:8), unemployment is seen as a lack of job opportunities for graduates and matriculates. Unemployment in South African is extraordinary and rising. Unemployment rate which is officially at around 27%, high levels of poverty, poor infrastructures such as road, health facilities and lack of houses (StatsSA, 2018). Unemployment is a matter of critical concern because of its effects on economic welfare, production, poverty, crime, erosion of human capital, social exclusion and social instability such as protests. Some view the level of unemployment and its rise as the most serious threat facing South African society and its governance (Kingdon & Knight, 2004:391).

According to Mamabolo (2015:143), high rate of poverty and joblessness in South Africa is a contributing factor towards xenophobic attack, protests and crimes. The people that are suffering from poverty and unemployment are often confused and desperate to such an extent of developing hatred against successful foreigners and elected representatives. This can be seen as a factor which mostly contributes to service delivery protests because most people mostly rely on government or their local municipalities for better service delivery due to lack of economic opportunities such as proper employment and food security. Department of Cooperative Governance, Human Settlement and Traditional Affairs (2014:7) also support the statement that poverty and joblessness constrain the developmental local governance. As a result of poor governance in local government, the majority of people, particularly youth are not working with relevant qualifications. From Greater Tzaneen municipality Integrated Development Plan (IDP), unemployment rate ranges from 36.9% to 47.1% in the year 2017/18 which contribute to increased risk of malnutrition, poverty and crime in the area (Greater Tzaneen municipality IDP, 2017/18). The level of unemployment has risen drastically for both youth and adult in the society, looking at different villages such as Relela, Sethong, Morutji, Motupa and Moleketla villages. The Department of Cooperative Governance, Human Settlement and Traditional Affairs (2014:7) indicate that "Most of the participants indicated that they have qualifications but they are unemployed. It is unpleasant to have people who had qualifications since the late 1990's but still not having a permanent or a proper job. This is the reason why people are angry at the government as they are blaming the local government in all these ills". According to The Natal Witness (2003), indicates that poverty is a crucial factor that causes protests in communities as many people are being required to pay bills for basic services such as water and electricity, refuse removal even though they do not afford.

Dassah (2012:10) share the same sentiment that a major factor in the protests is poverty, with its accompanying socio-economic conditions and unemployment. These problems pose a difficult obstacle to good provision and sustainable development. Lastly, Chikulo (2016:54) states that there are claims that the protests against poor service delivery are strengthened by the growing inequality and poverty in South African societies. Regardless

of the achievement of significant service delivery milestones, minor progress has been made on the central objectives of reducing poverty and inequality. According to Political Process Theory by McAdams Douglas (1970), community members engage in a mobilization structure to foster social and economic changes such as reducing pandemic challenges such as poverty, unemployment and inequality faced by the country.

3.3 Corruption and Nepotism

According to Mhango and Chirwa (2018:5), corruption is a common appearance of poor governance in most developing countries. According to The Citizen (2014), it is relieved that the Greater Tzaneen Local Municipality is faced with corrupt practices and unethical behaviours including lack of accountability by public servants. It is also found that the Greater Tzaneen Local Municipality has not followed proper supply chain management processes or procedures when procuring goods and services. The Citizen (2014) reported that "the municipality has uncovered irregular tenders worth more than R40 million. According to the documents presented to The Citizen, the municipality deviated from tendering processes when awarding Quality Plant Hire and Expectra 388 cc the tenders. Expectra 388 cc was awarded an R38 million tar road project without even submitting a formal document". In this paper, poor accountability within the municipality has been noted as one factor which influences service delivery demonstration by community members within the jurisdiction of the municipality. Corruption threatens the livelihood of everyone by crippling service provision, undermining economic development and eroding the lawfulness and proper functioning of the state. Corruption and other unethical conduct such as nepotism by public servants and political office bearers have been the driving factors toward service delivery protests and in most cases, this has led to community member going on strike or protest for better and sufficient service delivery. Managa (2012:5) indicated that Limpopo Province has not been in the spotlight about protests lately. He believes that "many protests were conveyed between 2007 and 2010, of which 42% were in the Sekhukhune district, followed by the Mopani and Vhembe districts at 17% while 14% were in the Capricorn district and 10% in the Waterberg district. Managa (2012:5) further indicate that are often protesters that refer to a lack of accountability of government officials, corruption

and maladministration as the aggravating factors to service delivery protest".

3.4 Political Instability and Unfulfilled Promises

The protests had not only been about houses, water, and toilets, electricity and other infrastructures, but also about the political process. At the municipal level, protesters had regularly complained about the unresponsiveness of officials and Councillors. With this statement, it is clear that there is a problem with politicians who do not listen to protesters (Twala, 2014:163). Furthermore, service delivery discontent is influenced by a number of factors including inequality, unfulfilled political promises and uneven access to services. Frustration is compounded by the lack of responsiveness by officials and Councillors as well as limited or unclear channels of communication, provision of substandard services and high levels of poverty (Masiya, Davids & Mangai, 2019:38). Ndaba (2007) stated that the "African National Congress admitted that infighting within the organization contributed to the service delivery protests at South African municipalities". The Department of Cooperative Governance, Human Settlement and Traditional Affairs (2014:8) also support that there is political infighting occurring in certain municipalities in South Africa, which undermined the provision of service delivery and development.

3.5 Lack of Access to Information

According to the Constitution of Republic of South Africa (1996), section 32 (1), paragraph (a), anyone has the right to access to any information held by the state, unless the information is classified. Everyone has the right to access to information such as legislation, regulations, economic and social opportunities within their area of jurisdiction. Procedures under section 32 of the constitution are regulated by the Promotion of Access to Information Act (2 of 2000). Besides, Batho Pele Principles (1997) also emphasis on access to information as an individual right as illustrated in the Bill of Rights. "Information: all citizens are entitled to full, accurate information" (Batho Pele, 1997). Mathebula (2017:108) believes that this right must be conferred by the government. Failure by the government to provide access to information or other basic services has resulted in the public revolting through protests. According to Allan and Heese (2004), service delivery protests in rural areas makes it clear how a lack of access

to information often leads to the rapid spread of rumours of favouritism, corruption, and mismanagement. In this paper, the researcher believes that indeed Lack of access to information is also a contributing factor behind service delivery protests within Greater Tzaneen Local Municipality areas. Despite media and other forms of communication tools, communication is still a pandemic issue which needs to be resolved and improved.

3.6 Lack of Participatory Democracy

Managa (2012:4) indicated that protesters mostly express discontent and frustrations for being excluded from local government decision-making. Section 16 subsection (1) of the Municipal Systems Act (2000) requires a municipality to develop a culture of municipal governance that complements formal representative government with a system of participatory governance. Municipal councils must encourage the involvement of the local community in the decisions that directly affect them. Booyesen (2007:25) affirm that the right of public participation in the governance process is a constitutional obligation and protected by various policy frameworks governing local governments. The community involvement is meant to provide information as well as improve public decisions, programmes and projects. Without a doubt, public participation is both a constitutional and legal prerequisite (Tsatsire, 2008:166). Bekker (1996:75) also states that "citizen participation can serve as a means of converting dependents into independents, that is converting the poor from the passive consumers of services into the producers of those services, thereby benefiting them both economically and socially by taking part in governing". Therefore, participatory democracy is a great challenge for democratic South Africa due to inadequate knowledge of citizens about political operation locally and internationally. The service delivery protests and marches are a clear indication that participatory democracy is a great challenge in democratic South Africa and as a result poor public participation leads to underdevelopment of local government (Modise, 2017:2).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper explored underlying factors behind service delivery protests in the local government. Despite some of the success of the post-apartheid South African government, the country still faces some serious challenges of unemployment, poverty

and inequality, political instability. These are some of the key factors which culminated to citizens on streets to protesting or expressing their dissatisfaction over the problem of poor service delivery, commonly known as service delivery protest. Service delivery is a common phrase in South Africa used to describe the distribution of basic resources which citizens depend on daily such as water and sanitation, electricity, transport and road infrastructures, health service, refuse and waste removal and shelter. To realize developmental local government and sustainable development, the paper recommends lawfulness and peacefulness protests among community protesters, municipality representatives and South African Police Service (SAPS) and other stakeholders involved. This paper also promotes effective communication as a tool for all challenges faced by both stakeholders. Therefore, this paper encourages that communication must also be fostered among the parties involved to avoid issues such as violence and malicious damaging of properties during the strike. Concerning corruption practices, the paper recommends that organisations found guilty of misconducts and misappropriations must be black-listed and must face criminal charges in terms of the Prevention and Combating of Corruption Act 12 of 2004.

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