

Municipal Mayhem: Institutional, Political and Capacity Drivers of Poor Service Delivery in South African Local Governments

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Abstract

This article examines why many South African municipalities fail to deliver basic services reliably, despite a robust constitutional mandate and recurrent reform efforts. The study aims to synthesise institutional, political and capacity explanations for municipal underperformance, trace the mechanisms linking these drivers to fiscal and operational collapse, and identify policy-relevant remedies to avert systemic “municipal mayhem.” Adopting a qualitative literature-review approach, the analysis draws on peer-reviewed studies, policy reports and audit and survey data sourced from Google Scholar, JSTOR and EBSCOhost as well as AGSA, Statistics South Africa, COGTA, DBSA and civic surveys. The review finds that service-delivery failure is produced by the interaction of weak financial management and revenue shortfalls, politicised appointments and interference, entrenched corruption, chronic skills and technical capacity gaps, inadequate infrastructure maintenance and legacy inequities from apartheid, all compounded by weak consequences for malpractice and uneven intergovernmental support. These dynamics generate fiscal unsustainability, poor audit outcomes, recurring protests and erosion of public trust. Recommended responses include reforming the municipal funding model to ensure predictable, equitable and conditional finance for core functions; strengthening fiscal oversight, procurement and consequence-management regimes; prioritising targeted capacity development and professionalised administration; insulating technical functions from undue political interference; and aligning intergovernmental support to local context. We propose an integrated theoretical framework to guide empirical inquiry and pragmatic reform pathways for restoring municipal functionality.

Keywords: *Local Government, Service Delivery, South Africa, Governance, Institutional Capacity, Political Economy.*

Introduction

Challenges in the delivery of services by municipalities in South Africa are long-standing and widespread, resulting from a mix of inadequate infrastructure, corruption, shortages in skills, administrative inefficiency, financial mismanagement and interference from politicians (Mkhabela & Isabirye, 2025; Mkhabela et al., 2025; Twala, 2014). These interconnected issues result in tangible impacts upon communities and on the lives of individuals. The effects include increased poverty, reduced living standards, greater unemployment, civil unrest, reduced trust in public authorities and reduced economic development in the region (Mkhabela and Isabirye, 2025; Reddy, 2016). While the delivery of effective services is the core mandate of local government (Mkhabela et al 2025), many local authorities still face challenges of service delivery. According to the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA) (2025), much of failure by local government authorities is due to inadequate resources and capacity to respond to community needs. National and provincial governments retain responsibility for enabling development and ensuring reliable infrastructure, yet recurring shortfalls suggest systemic gaps in the design and implementation of municipal support (Mamokhere, 2025; Mashwama et al., 2019).

The current crisis is exacerbated by a complex interplay of historical factors and modern day tensions. Many municipalities are still struggling with the legacy of apartheid, rapid urbanisation and informal settlements which are putting a strain on ageing infrastructure (Mamokhere, 2023). Weak governance, inadequate financial controls and a lack of proper operational systems within the administration, coupled with a culture of corruption, nepotism and a scarcity of adequately trained personnel within the administration, result in poor public services (Mamokhere, 2023; Mkhabela and Isabirye, 2025). A growing number of complaints regarding socio-economic rights have been noted, with the South African Human Rights Commission

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report (2022). The report indicates that there are widespread human rights breaches due to a collapse of local services. This collapse particularly affects smaller municipalities which are unsustainable and therefore fail to meet basic service obligations.

These problems have been longstanding. In 2004 for instance, interventions like Project Consolidate, identified large numbers of municipalities that needed support and it was observed that more than half of the municipalities were dysfunctional in terms of service delivery and their financial viability (Mkhabela et al., 2025). At the moment, numerous parts of the country continue to suffer from persistent poverty and a lack of community stability as a result of recurring issues with electricity and water supply as well as sanitation. Public distrust is apparent as it manifests through public protests and service disruptions which often occur, and are accompanied by destruction of property and civil disturbances (Zindi & Ndhlovu, 2023; Chili et al., 2023). These disruptions and protests inevitably result into fiscal decline, unemployment, weakened local governance, poor audit outcomes and inability to implement constitutional and developmental mandates (DBSA, 2025; Mamokhere, 2025; Thusi & Selepe, 2023). Whilst progress has been made in the democratic local government since 1994, with notable rises in home access to water and electricity, historical disparities still remain (COGTA, 2016; People's Assembly, 2019; Kaywood, 2021; EyeWitness, 2021; Redy, 2016); coexisting with the advancements especially in cities and smaller town authorities where there are fiscal and resource problems (Reddy, 2016; Mkhabela & Isabirye, 2025).

This article therefore seeks to provide a theoretical lens for understanding why South African local government continues to underperform despite legislative mandates and episodic reform efforts. It aims to integrate institutional, political and capacity explanations into a coherent analytical framework that links root causes to service outcomes, to map the mechanisms—financial, administrative and political—by which these drivers produce fiscal instability and operational failures, and to identify policy and managerial interventions that could strengthen municipal responsiveness while recognising political-economic constraints. In pursuit of these objectives the study examines which institutional, political and capacity factors most consistently explain poor service delivery; it explores how those factors translate into diminished access, governance breakdown and social risk; and it evaluates policy initiatives that might help resuscitate municipal functionality and improve accountability and sustainability. By focusing on causal pathways and reform tradeoffs, the paper seeks to move beyond descriptive accounts toward a theory-informed agenda for restoring the capacity of local government to meet its constitutional and developmental responsibilities.

Context and Background of the Study

Government at the local level in South Africa is a distinct area, protected in the constitution, in which councils of the municipality are endowed with the powers of both government and legislation and are also required to promote local development (Govender & Ramodula, 2020). In South Africa, various types of municipalities - metropolitan, local and district - have their powers and duties decentralised to them. Metropolitan municipalities have extensive powers to govern their metropolitan area, whereas in other areas that are not metropolitan, both district and local councils are responsible for different services as per the Municipal Systems Act 32 (2000) and related laws. In accordance with the Constitution and the principles of intergovernmental cooperation the municipalities should therefore be viewed as self-governing entities within a system of national, provincial and local government levels. National and provincial authorities are bound by the system to support and assist local authority functioning (COGTA, 2025).

In reality, however, municipalities do not have powers strong or duties comprehensive enough to guarantee reliable services are provided. Financed by a mix of money raised by local authorities - through taxes and service charges - and grants, government at a national level offer both unconditional and conditional funding (Ajam, 2021; De Visser, 2023; Local Government, 2025). It is the role of the department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) to ensure there is coordination of intergovernmental financial assistance. Financial difficulties are being faced by many local authorities due to the inadequate collection of revenue, limited scope for tax increases and unequal access to funding from central government. This situation hampers their capacity to provide basic services or maintain the

necessary infrastructure. A combination of financial difficulties and organisational shortcomings are hampering efforts to improve water supply infrastructure. The issues include inadequate planning and procurement procedures, a shortage of skilled engineers and technicians and ageing water supply infrastructure which is suffering from the effects of rapid population growth and the legacies of apartheid (Mlambo & Maserumule, 2023; Mamokhere, 2023).

These failures are reflected in the regular adverse findings by oversight institutions and in public response. A report for example, from the Auditor-General (AGSA) (2023/24) reveals numerous problems in audits and inadequacy of service delivery. Only a minority of local councils passed the audit without any issues. Many municipalities are found to be delivering and maintaining poor infrastructure which is then affecting services across the board (AGSA, 2023/24). These governance deficits are confirmed by both civil society groups and surveys. There have been frequent and violent protests about water, sanitation, housing and electricity which, at times, have been quite violent, demonstrating the public's deep frustration with these persistent problems (Afrobarometer, 2023). These results are closely linked to entrenched corruption, mismanagement of finances and governance weaknesses in the city councils (Thusi & Selepe, 2023; Chukwumeka, 2018).

The whole legal and regulatory framework in which municipalities operate sets both the problem and the means of its solution. Local government operates within the parameters of the Municipal Systems Act and the overall governmental framework which is made up of the policies on planning, budgeting and public participation; section 139 of the constitution allows the national government to intervene in the affairs of local councils if they are not fulfilling their obligations (Republic of South Africa, 1996; Municipal Systems Act No 32 of 2000; COGTA, 2020). Interventions in this area to date have been limited in their impact; these have included projects aimed at developing administrative capacity, as well as programmes which offer targeted support. Despite this, the outcomes have been variable and suggest that changes in the underlying laws and in the resources available are insufficient on their own to guarantee improvement (DBSA, 2025).

This study is situated against that unresolved tension between statutory mandate and operational reality. The central problem it addresses is why, despite a robust constitutional framework and multiple reform efforts, many South African municipalities remain unable to deliver basic services reliably. The research therefore aims to unpack the institutional, political and capacity drivers that produce municipal underperformance, to trace the mechanisms through which these drivers translate into fiscal and operational collapse, and to assess policy options that could restore municipal functionality while recognising the constraints of political economy and administrative capacity. By anchoring the analysis in South Africa's legal and fiscal context and in contemporary evidence of municipal distress, the study seeks to generate a theory-informed understanding of municipal mayhem and to identify pragmatic entry points for reform.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-building literature review methodology, drawing on peer-reviewed scholarship, government publications, audit and policy reports, and high-quality grey literature to construct an integrated account of institutional, political and capacity drivers of municipal service failure in South Africa. Literature was identified through systematic searches of Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, EBSCOhost, Sabinet Online and Google Scholar, complemented by targeted searches of South African repositories and institutional websites (AGSA, DBSA, COGTA, SAHRC, Afrobarometer and municipal portals). Search terms included combinations of “municipal”, “local government”, “service delivery”, “South Africa”, “governance”, “capacity”, “corruption”, “intergovernmental relations” and related synonyms; the temporal frame prioritized work since 1994 to capture post-apartheid dynamics up to 2025. Inclusion criteria required relevance to municipal service delivery or governance in South Africa, conceptual or empirical treatment of institutional, political or capacity factors, and sufficient methodological transparency; excluded were non-English items, purely technical engineering reports lacking governance analysis, and unverified opinion pieces. An initial corpus was de-duplicated and screened by title and

abstract, followed by full-text review and purposive sampling to ensure conceptual depth and sectoral balance. Data extraction recorded arguments, methods and evidence, and analysis proceeded through iterative thematic coding and synthesis to identify causal mechanisms and policy implications. Credibility was assured via source triangulation, appraisal of study quality (using established checklists for qualitative studies and AACODS criteria for grey literature), cross-validation against primary institutional reports, and maintenance of an audit trail of searches and coding decisions; limitations, including publication and language bias and uneven municipal data, are acknowledged and reflected in the interpretation.

Theoretical Framing and Literature Review

A Plural theoretical Approach

This study adopts a plural theoretical approach on the premise that municipal mayhem cannot be captured adequately by a single theory: the problem spans formal rules and incentives, informal political dynamics, and organizational capabilities, and therefore requires an analytical palette that can register path-dependent constraints, distributive politics, accountability failures and implementation capacity simultaneously. Institutional theory, understood broadly to include strands of new institutional economics and historical institutionalism, provides a useful anchor because it directs attention to how constitutional arrangements, statutes, planning instruments and historical legacies structure municipal behaviour and constrain choices (Risi et al., 2023; Li & Bosma, 2025; Schiavi et al., 2024). From this perspective, apartheid-era backlogs, the constitutional design of a distinct local sphere, intergovernmental fiscal rules and entrenched organizational routines are not peripheral context but causal forces that produce durable patterns of capacity and service outcomes; institutional concepts such as path dependence and institutional complementarity help explain why reforms often succeed only when paired with complementary changes in rules, incentives or resources (Mkhabela et al., 2025; Enaifoghe, 2022; Okeng & Diala, 2024).

Complementary to institutional explanations, political-economy and clientelism/rent-seeking perspectives illuminate how the distribution of power and incentives shapes municipal decision-making in ways that institutional accounts alone may understate. Party politics, patronage networks, politicized appointments and interference in procurement create perverse short-term incentives that systematically favour electoral or elite rents over sustained service provision (Kim et al., 2022; Ngumela, 2022). Political-economy theory is thus particularly useful for explaining variation among municipalities that share similar formal endowments but differ in political settlement, the degree of elite capture or the salience of clientelist linkages (Mkhabela & Isabirye, 2025; Thusi & Selepe, 2023).

Principal-agent frameworks sharpen analysis of specific accountability breakdowns between citizens, elected councilors, senior managers and frontline staff. Agency logic highlights information asymmetries, monitoring costs and the design problems of delegating authority across multiple actors; applied to local government, it clarifies why weak oversight, fragmented responsibilities and poorly designed performance contracts allow maladministration and corruption to persist (Gwala & Mashau, 2023; Yan et al., 2021; Wardoyo et al., 2021). Recent work on felt accountability and the micro-dynamics of oversight further suggests that observable sanctions, meaningful reporting channels and credible monitoring change agent behaviour only when they alter rewards and risks for incumbents (Overman & Schillemans, 2022).

Organizational capacity and public administration literatures, including street-level bureaucracy theory, are essential for diagnosing the managerial and technical constraints that mediate the translation of policy into services. At national and local levels, these frameworks foreground the importance of workforce skills, leadership, planning and procurement systems. They do not only explain the lack of qualified personnel, weak operating systems and poor maintenance practices compound resource shortages, but also bad maintenance techniques and a lack of skilled personnel, leading to informal fees and rationing at local level (Masiya et al., 2006). This view is complemented by the systems theory which states that municipal system is made up of three interconnected systems, i.e. the political, financial and administrative systems; and changes in one of these systems (for example political instability) can cause consequences in the other two (Kuhlengisa et al., 2024; Glasser & Wright, 202).

Meanwhile, Fiscal federalism and public finance theories enable better understanding of municipal revenue and expenditure by connecting the capacity to deliver services with intergovernmental transfers, local tax income and long-term financial sustainability (King, 2022; Agrawal, Brueckner & Brühlhart, 2024; Akapelwa & Mwangi, 2023). The way grants are structured; the conditions that accompany them and the timing of transfers all have an influence on the investment strategies of local authorities and the timeframe over which they can plan. Researchers have pointed to measures which could lead to better results, including altering the conditions under which grants are made and implementing measures to increase local tax revenues.

Lastly, collective action, social accountability and civic participation literature provide insight into the instances in which public protest, oversight and pressure affect municipal authorities. When citizen participation is facilitated through participatory budgeting and civic engagement, along with transparency and mechanisms which have an impact, trust in government can be restored and the priorities of the local government can be influenced. This is however only possible where citizens have the information, organisational capacity and the ability to make a complaint or take action against the local government (Overman & Schillemans, 2022; Kim et al., 2022). Afrobarometer (2023) notes that the fact that there have been protests in South Africa about water, sanitation and power indicates that people are very involved in local politics.

Synthesising these perspectives, we develop the Isabirye- Mkhabela institutional–political–capacity (IPC) framework that aligns directly with the study’s aims. Institutional theory maps the formal constraints and historical legacies that structure municipal choice; political-economy and clientelism strands diagnose the incentive environments that encourage capture or short-termism; principal–agent and organizational capacity theories identify mechanisms of accountability failure and implementation gaps; and fiscal federalism together with collective-action perspectives indicate resource and civic levers for reform. Operationalising this multi-theory framework suggests a set of observable indicators that link theory to measurement and methods. For instance, governance and fiscal health are signaled by AGSA outcomes and findings (AGSA, 2023/24). Skills metrics, leadership turnover and vacancy rates indicate capacity constraints (Masiya et al., 2021; Mkhabela et al., 2025); while clientelism is signaled by procurement irregularities, political interference in hiring processes and any deviations from standard procurement procedures (De Visser, 2023; Akapelwa & Mwangi, 2023). Social accountability pressures are driven by protest incidence, levels of civic participation and the volume of complaints from the public (Afrobarometer, 2023; Overman & Schillemans, 2022).

In sum, plural theoretical framing preserves analytical depth while offering concrete entry points for policy design and evaluation. By integrating institutional, political-economy, principal–agent, capacity and fiscal perspectives, the study aims to explain not only why municipal mayhem occurs, but where and how reform efforts might interrupt causal chains—whether through reformed rules, altered incentives, targeted capacity investments or strengthened civic oversight—and thereby to generate theory-informed, policy-relevant recommendations for resuscitating South African local government

Literature Review

Understanding persistent service-delivery failures in South African municipalities requires integrated scholarship. There is need to integrate literature on institutional design, political incentives and administrative capacity, since these domains interact to produce the dysfunction, the present study seeks to explain (Mamokhere, 2025; Selepe, 2023). Figure 1 below captures broadly the major causes of municipal mayhem as synthesized from the explored literature.

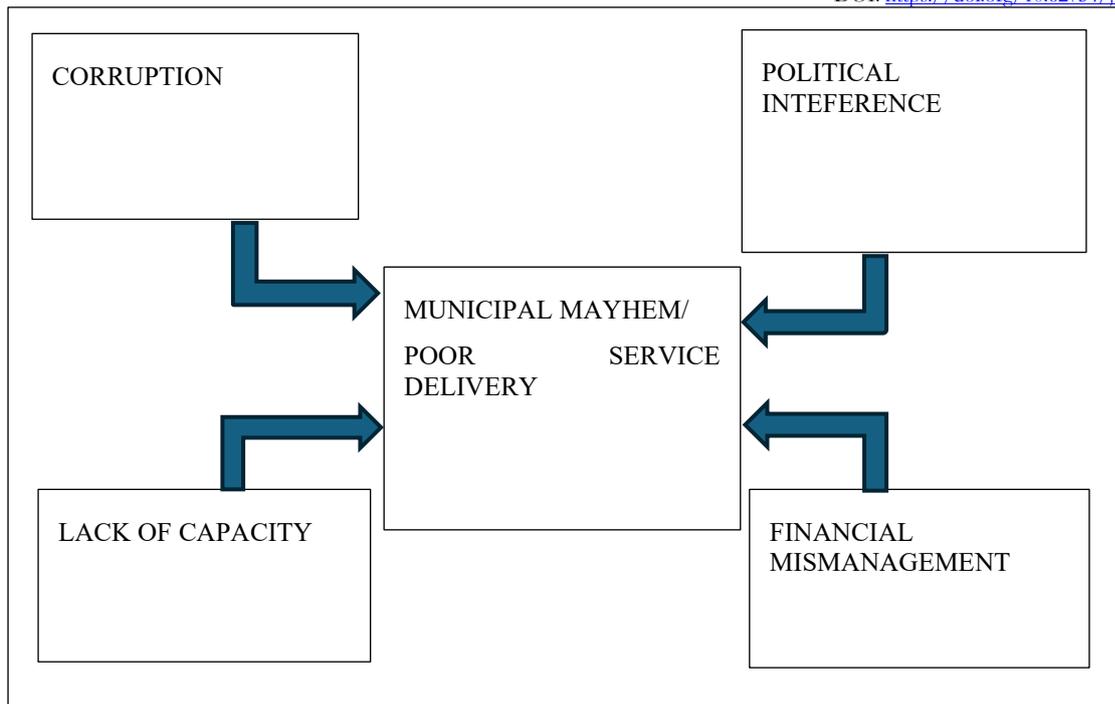


Figure 1: Factors Responsible for Poor Service Delivery

Across the literature several common municipal management and administrative problems have been identified. These problems include corruption, inadequate financial control and skill shortages. Additionally, weak political controls and interference in municipal administration have also been identified as major reasons for poor service delivery (Glasser & Wright, 202; McKenzie & Marx, 2023; Chukwumeka, 2018). In the context of severe unemployment and extreme poverty as witnessed in South Africa, coupled with the rapid urban population due to a huge influx of people from rural areas, a massive strain has been put on South African municipalities. This strain is further exacerbated by the legacy of apartheid which resulted in inadequate infrastructure. It is these factors that contribute to the increased demand for services and make it difficult for the local government to respond effectively (Statistics South Africa, 2025; Mamokhere, 2023; Mthiyane et al., 2022). But Key themes that could further explain local governments' failure to provide adequate services, lie in institutional arrangements and governance processes. Although there are formal rules and oversight bodies, municipal governance is characterized by a lack of transparency and accountability. This leads to a situation where there is inefficient use of funds and poor consequences management because of non-compliance with the existing rules and regulations (Munzhedzi, 2016; AGSA, 2023/24; Moji et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is significant fragmentation between the processes of planning, budgeting and evaluation, as well as amongst different levels of government. This results in duplicated efforts, policy incoherence and the lack of opportunities for integrated service delivery (Fourie & Van der Waldt, 2023; Mkhabela et al., 2025). While there are legal frameworks to guide the processes, they are not effectively implemented. Indeed, Mazibuko & Fourie (2017); Mkhabela et al., (2025) argue for the need for effective enforcement, institutional coherence and the capacity to implement rules to ensure the expected outcomes.

Institutional weaknesses are compounded by political factors. The allocation of public resources to clientelism, patronage and cadre deployment diverts these away from public goods to politically-motivated distribution. They undermine meritocratic appointments and accountability within public institutions. Furthermore, they lead to short-term interventions. These are driven by electoral considerations rather than long-term service delivery (Twala, 2014; Mabizela, 2024; Paniagua, 2022). Politicization of this does not only undermine professional standards, but also hinders objective decision-making in areas like supplies and personnel management (Kalonda & Govender, 2021; Pelsler & Qomfo, 2024). Furthermore, it creates discord between elected officials and municipal staff; hampering effective oversight and spending control. When municipal authorities give priority to electoral interests and party rivalry over their programme

commitments, the literature advises that the local authorities are more prone to inefficiency and a loss of public confidence, often leading to demonstrations and civil disturbance (Afrobarometer, 2023; Chili et al., 2023).

There is also need to note that Municipal underperformance is also frequently due to fiscal and financial constraints, which are themselves consequences of poor performance. State capitals in developing countries are often characterised by chronic liquidity problems and unsustainable debt positions, due to internal weaknesses combined with external pressures. These internal weaknesses include poor revenue management, weak internal controls, unfilled financial posts and procurement irregularities (McKenzie & Marx, 2024; Glasser & Wright, 2022). The Auditor-General's findings reveal severe weaknesses in financial management, widespread instances of mismanagement and a very small number of audits which were faultless, it has been shown that financial mismanagement can severely affect maintenance of infrastructure and the delivery of public services (AGSA, 2023/24).

The literature further highlights how fiscal distress produces negative feedback loops: deteriorating services reduce willingness and ability to pay, which in turn worsens municipal cashflows and service capacity (McKenzie & Marx, 2023). Closely related to fiscal problems are gaps in administrative and technical capacity. Studies emphasise that effective municipal performance depends on a combination of managerial competencies, technical expertise in engineering and asset management, and information-systems capabilities to plan and monitor delivery (Masombuka & Thani, 2023; Abbas et al., 2023; Luise & Cocozza, 2025). The lack of an efficient system is caused by poor planning, inadequate maintenance of assets and insufficient use of available data as well as the failure to implement the recommendations of the Auditor-General. These problems are intensified where politicians stop appointees from being held accountable because they do not have the necessary qualifications (Mofokeng et al., 2017; Mazibuko & Fourie, 2017). Capacity in literature is defined not just as a lack of skills but as systems, authority and incentives that enable skills to be used efficiently. Institutions and oversight mechanisms are under consistent scrutiny due to their inconsistent record of success. Municipalities in South Africa are hampered in their ability to improve service delivery by the lack of effectiveness of the oversight bodies such as ward committees and municipal public accounts committees. The main problems experienced by these bodies are a lack of technical knowledge to carry out their duties, and politicization as observed by Fourie and van der Waldt (2023). There is also needed to note that the current oversight of public finances allows corruption to endure and includes such issues as procurement and financial fraud as well as other abuses of power, as witnessed in procurement manipulation and tender irregularities (Adanlawo & Chaka, 2024; Munzhedzi, 2016; Arista & Fazekas, 2024).

From the foregoing discussion, it can be asserted that corruption and maladministration are both symptoms of municipal collapse. Indeed, research has shown that corruption in public procurement procedures (such as the award of contracts to those with connections to politicians and the overcharging of government departments) wastes taxpayer's money and impairs the delivery of vital public services. The practice of deploying cadres undermines the principles of good ethical governance by replacing ability with loyalty. This weakens the implementation of financial management legislation like the MFMA (T'wala, 2014; Swanepoel, 2021; Mazibuko & Fourie, 2017). Irregularities in expenditure, although not always indicative of bad management, do imply a lack of compliance within an institution and suggest the need for investigations and penalties to maintain financial discipline within that institution. In these contexts, socio-economic and spatial dynamics establish the environment that nurtures mayhem and poor service delivery. These are issues which often arise in contexts of extreme poverty - rapidly urbanising populations with inadequate services. In informal settlements, there are often poor provision of water, sanitation and electricity. Housing is also often inadequate in these areas. (Ouma et al., 2023; Matshika & Gumbo, 2023; Parikh et al., 2022). The spatial marginalisation of informal settlements not only raises the cost and complexity of service provision but also magnifies the political salience of service delivery failures, fueling protests and eroding social cohesion (Muzondi, 2014; Mthiyane et al., 2022).

Across these debates, a common analytical thread is that institutional rules, political incentives and administrative capacity cannot be treated in isolation. Low compliance with formal rules, political capture and capacity shortfalls interact to produce the fiscal, operational and governance outcomes identified in Auditor-General reports and empirical studies. This literature therefore supports the study's aim to develop an integrated conceptual framework that traces causal pathways from institutional and political drivers through capacity constraints to observable service failures, and to identify reform options that are sensitive to the political-economic realities of South African local government. By synthesising these literatures, the current research seeks to move beyond descriptive accounts toward a theory-informed explanation of municipal mayhem and to surface pragmatic entry points for restoring municipal functionality.

Summary of Findings

The literature reviewed converges on a coherent, sobering account that municipal service-delivery failure in South Africa is neither accidental nor monocausal but emerges from the dense interaction of institutional, political and capacity deficits, all embedded within adverse socio-economic and spatial pressures. Institutional weaknesses—manifest in non-compliance with statutory requirements, weak internal controls and pervasive irregular, unauthorised and wasteful expenditure—recurrently undermine fiduciary integrity and operational coherence (Chukwuemeka, 2018; AGSA, 2023/24). Political dynamics, including clientelism, patronage and cadre deployment, distort recruitment, procurement and resource allocation, erode administrative neutrality and create incentives that prioritise short-term political returns over sustained service provision (Paniague, 2022; Mabizela, 2024; Kalonda & Govender, 2021; Twala, 2014; Swanepoel, 2021). Fiscal problems—weak revenue collection, poor debt and liquidity management and procurement irregularities—both result from and reinforce these institutional and political failures, producing chronic cash-flow constraints and technical insolvency in many municipalities (McKenzie & Marx, 2023; Glasser & Wright, 202; McKenzie & Marx, 2024; Mofokeng et al, 2025). Shortfalls in administrative and technical capacity, spanning human resources, information systems, planning, procurement and infrastructure maintenance, obstruct the translation of budgets and plans into reliable services (Masombuka & Thani, 2023; Abbas et al, 2023; Luise & Coccozza, 2025; Peters, 2015; Mazibuko & Fourie, 2017).

Oversight mechanisms intended to check and correct these failures are frequently compromised or under-resourced. Auditor-General findings, weak follow-through by Municipal Public Accounts Committees and limited consequence management mean that audit recommendations often go unimplemented and accountability loops remain incomplete (AGSA, 2023-24; Moji et al, 2022; Fourie & Van der Waldt, 2023; Janda & Masango, 2024). Corruption and maladministration, especially procurement fraud and irregular expenditure—appear as both symptoms and accelerants of municipal dysfunction (Adanlawo & Chaka, 2024; Arista & Fazekas, 2024; Munzhedzi, 2016; Munzhedzi, 2026). These governance failures play out against persistent socio-economic and spatial pressures: rapid urbanisation, entrenched inequality and the proliferation of informal settlements concentrate service needs and produce infrastructure backlogs that many municipal systems were ill-designed to absorb (Statistics South Africa, 2025; Ouma et al, 2023; Matshika & Gumbo, 2023; Parikh et al, 202; Muzondi, 2014).

Taken together, these strands point to a self-reinforcing dynamic: institutional non-compliance, political capture and capacity deficits interact to generate fiscal distress, erode oversight and constrain service delivery. What remains unsettled in the literature—and is the analytic focus of this study—is the relative causal weight of these drivers in different municipal contexts and the precise mechanisms through which they translate into service-level outcomes. Addressing that empirical and policy gap requires a synthetic, mechanism-focused theoretical framework that both organises existing evidence and directs remedial action.

An Integrated Theoretical Framework for Diagnosis and Reform

To operationalise solutions to municipal mayhem, we propose and construct the Isabirye-Mkhabela Integrated Institutional–Political–Capacity (IPC) framework that explicitly links root causes to mechanisms and policy levers. The IPC framework conceives municipal performance as the outcome of interacting subsystems: institutional rules and enforcement; political incentives and behaviour; administrative and technical capacity; fiscal flows and asset condition; and socio-economic demand and spatial constraints. In this framework, the institutional weaknesses, such as weak control systems, the lack of a unified plan and inadequate implementation, mainly hinder the delivery of public services by allowing the diversion of funds, obstructing coherent planning and compromising the integrity of the procurement process. The influence of politics affects staffing by steering the hiring process, who gets promoted and who gets contracts, meaning that a system where the best qualified are employed is undermined and resources are diverted to help supporters of those in power. This results in weak implementation and accountability. Because capacity shortages prevent a plan and budget from being turned into functioning services and infrastructure, gaps appear in data systems, financial management and technical maintenance. (Masombuka & Thani, 2023; Abbas et al, 2023; Luise & Coccozza, 2025). Fiscal constraints and procurement abuse both reflect and magnify these processes, producing cash-flow crises that prevent routine maintenance and capital renewal (McKenzie & Marx, 2023; Glasser & Wright, 202). Figure 2 presents the constructed framework.

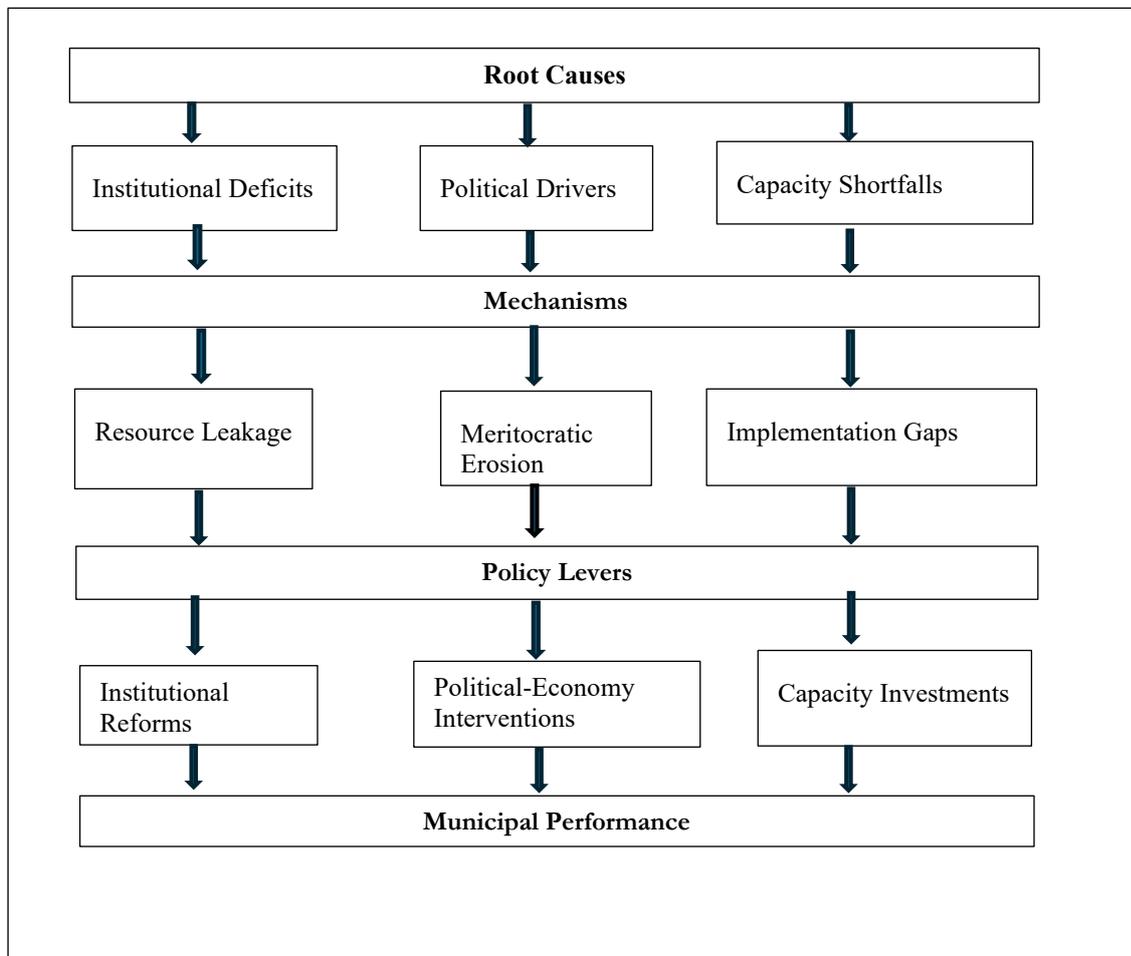


Figure 2: The Isabirye - Mkhabela Integrated Institutional - Political-Capacity (IPC) Framework

The IPC framework emphasises causal pathways and feedback loops. A typical pathway runs from political capture to compromised appointments, which reduce technical capacity and enable procurement abuses, which in turn generate irregular expenditure and fiscal stress; fiscal stress curtails maintenance and investment, producing service interruptions that trigger public protest and further politicised responses—

a cycle that reproduces dysfunction. Socio-economic and spatial moderators—such as rapid urbanisation and informal settlement concentrations—intensify demand shocks and increase the sensitivity of system failure to capacity shortfalls (Statistics South Africa, 2025; Ouma et al, 2023). Oversight institutions and intergovernmental transfer systems act as potential dampers or amplifiers depending on their independence and effectiveness: robust audit follow-up and targeted conditional support can break feedback loops, whereas weak accountability permits pathology to persist (AGSA, 2023-24; Janda & Masango, 2024).

From a policy and implementation perspective, the IPC framework identifies three mutually reinforcing clusters of reform levers. Institutional reforms center on strengthening enforcement and consequence management, clarifying planning and budgeting fragmentation, and tightening procurement rules and transparency to reduce opportunities for leakage (Chukwuemeka, 2018; Moji et al, 2022). Political-economy interventions aim to reshape incentives: promoting meritocratic recruitment, insulating critical technical appointments from partisan removal, and aligning political performance metrics with sustained service outcomes rather than short-term distributive wins (Paniague, 2022; Mabizela, 2024; Twala, 2014). Capacity investments focus on rebuilding technical and managerial skills, modernising information and asset-management systems, and institutionalising routine maintenance regimes so that budgets translate into durable service provision (Masombuka & Thani, 2023; Luise & Cocozza, 2025; Peters, 2015). Crucially, the framework prescribes sequencing and calibration: diagnostic assessments should first map the dominant failure pathways in a given municipality (for example whether political capture or fiscal insolvency is the immediate driver), after which tailored combinations of the above levers are deployed alongside strengthened oversight and adaptive monitoring (AGSA, 2023-24; Moji et al, 2022).

Operationalisation of the IPC framework requires measurable indicators and iterative evaluation. Performance should be tracked across financial metrics (revenue collection rates, liquidity ratios, irregular expenditure levels), administrative indicators (vacancy rates in technical and finance posts, procurement compliance), service outputs (coverage and reliability of water, sanitation and electricity) and governance markers (audit outcomes, implementation of AGSA recommendations, incidence of protest). Interventions should be piloted in varied municipal typologies (metropolitan, mid-size, small/rural) to test contextual sensitivity and to refine conditional support mechanisms. Finally, the framework recognises political feasibility as a central constraint: reforms that ignore the distributional and electoral incentives that underpin municipal politics are unlikely to endure, so strategies must combine technical fixes with credible incentives and sanctions that realign political behaviour toward long-run service delivery.

In sum, the literature establishes a multi-dimensional pathology of municipal failure; the IPC framework organises that pathology into causal pathways, identifies leverage points for reform and prescribes a diagnostic, context-sensitive approach to intervention. This theoretical scaffold is intended both to guide empirical analysis of causal weights across municipal contexts and to inform policy design that is theoretically coherent, evidence-informed and politically pragmatic.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that municipal mayhem in South Africa cannot be attributed to a single failing; rather, it reflects the interaction of governance, accountability, capacity and fiscal weaknesses that together undermine municipal functionality. Past interventions have often treated these manifestations as discrete problems to be patched—ad hoc takeovers, short-term bailouts, and episodic technical secondments—without confronting the deeper drivers: politicised personnel decisions and cadre deployment, deficient oversight and consequence management, chronic skills shortages in finance and technical disciplines, and entrenched patterns of irregular and wasteful expenditure. Thus, many local councils slide back into old patterns after the introduction of new systems, people lose faith in the local authorities and the constitutional right to democratic local government is not met. Failure has been identified as complex in nature, implying a multifaceted system failure. Therefore, any proposed remedy will be comprehensive in nature. Effective and ethical leadership and management in a local authority are reliant on there being transparent and accountable procedures for the appointment of key personnel and the purchasing of services. A fiscal reform programme needs to go further than emergency payments to re-establish the

government's income and control public spending and ensure long-term investment in vital public services. This should be accompanied by proper checks to prevent corruption and ensure that public funds are properly managed.

Capacity building must shift from temporary relief to sustained in-house development: deliberate strategies for recruitment on merit, structured skills transfer, continuous professional development and retention of critical technical staff are essential if municipalities are to plan, maintain and operate infrastructure reliably. It is important to note that effective municipal governance demands open involvement of local residents; so that local authorities are accountable to the community they serve. More actively involved members of the public will ensure greater scrutiny of local government, preventing instances of getting away with bad behaviour and public services more accurately reflecting community needs. If fragmentation and duplication across different areas of government are to be reduced, it is essential that there is a better integration of institutions across these areas. This would also make it easier for coordinated planning for issues such as urbanisation and the use of land there.

Reform feasibility, however, is inherently political. Durable change will require changing incentive structures that currently reward patronage and short-termism and creating political-administrative bargains that make meritocratic administration and fiscal prudence politically sustainable. National oversight bodies, provincial coordinators and civil-society actors have roles to play in monitoring progress and supporting reform implementation, but ultimately success depends on sustained political will to enforce consequences for mismanagement and to prioritise long-term capacity investments over short-term fixes.

Finally, the analysis points to several priorities for further research and policy experimentation. Rigorous empirical work is needed to evaluate which combinations of governance, fiscal and capacity measures produce measurable improvements in service outcomes; comparative studies across municipal types can illuminate context-sensitive reform packages; and implementation research can identify how to scale successful pilots without reproducing dependency or undermining local autonomy. Only by treating governance, accountability, capacity and fiscal reform as mutually reinforcing elements of a coherent strategy can South Africa move toward local governments that reliably deliver the basic services and development outcomes that citizens deserve.

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