



# Thinking about ‘service delivery’

Thirty years into South Africa’s democracy, and shortly before the 2024 elections, we at the *South African Journal of Science* decided to open a call for a discussion series on service delivery, for publication after the elections early in the term of whatever new government would emerge. This series follows on our more focused *Discussions on Load Shedding* in 2023. It is perhaps instructive that, although at the time of writing this (early August 2024) the issue of load shedding seems less critical than a year ago, issues related more broadly to ‘service delivery’ are more varied and, unfortunately, durable.

When we made the call for submissions for ‘Discussions on Service Delivery’, we deliberately threw the net very wide and did not know how many submissions we would receive. We have been very heartened by the fact that we are publishing no fewer than 12, very varied, submissions. The first of these, in itself, makes the series worthwhile. In our call for submissions, we had not sufficiently thought about the potential difficulties with the concept of ‘service delivery’. Friedman’s contribution, in the best tradition of contributions to an interdisciplinary journal, forces us all to consider carefully what we mean when we talk about ‘service delivery’, and what is at stake politically and ideologically when we use the term. Not all readers may agree with Friedman’s claim that “‘service delivery’ exalts the technical function of the government and diminishes the agency of the citizen”, but Friedman’s contribution is important in showing us that the question of ‘service delivery’ and its framing in this way, is in itself a political question, and not merely a technical one.

Du Plessis and Fuo raise similarly fundamental questions about the role of legislation, the courts and the judiciary in relation to provision of services, and address the thorny question of, as they put it, “where the law struggles to deliver”. Here, we have a personification of the law as a potential ‘deliverer’, and as the authors show, it is impossible to separate questions of law from much broader and more tricky social questions. In terms of the interface between technical questions and human factors, Inggs and du Toit, although clearly aware of what they term organisational and cultural factors in how local government players organise and consider services, suggest that more attention be paid to fundamental systems analysis, with usable data forming part of feedback loops. They provide a very simple model onto which a range of contingencies can be mapped. At a more complex level, Biljohn and Magaiza argue that a quadruple helix model may go some way to help achieve, as they put it, “transformative aspirations and development futures”.

In this regard, Maree and Khanyile use survey data from Gauteng to demonstrate the need for reliable and dependable infrastructure as basic for quality improvement. Given widespread concerns about water availability and quality in many South African contexts, two of the discussion pieces focus specifically on water as a key issue. Luyaba and colleagues, in their national assessment of water infrastructure, demonstrate – through their analysis of the MuSSA (Municipal Strategic

Self-Assessment) framework – the complex interplay between technical, human, and social factors in questions of whether municipalities are, as they put it, unwilling or unable to deliver on promises, or both unwilling and unable. Focusing more closely on Johannesburg and surrounds, Sheridan emphasises the extent to which high-level questions about what we value as a society interact with more technical and visceral concerns (such as what he terms the ‘yuck’ factor in dealing with perceptions about drinking treated sewage), with all levels to be considered together as part of the system. Because Sheridan’s contribution deals specifically with Johannesburg, we did approach Johannesburg Water for a response; at the time of going to press we had not heard back from Johannesburg Water. When considering waste issues more generally, Kalina and Schenk emphasise the importance of, as they put it, “more inclusive arrangements that involve all actors in the waste value chain, in particular communities and the informal sector”, thus adding to a cross-cutting theme of social change and participation as central to dealing with what at face value may be viewed as purely technical questions.

Moving to more obviously human-centred questions, Hlongwane suggests what she terms a “varied and collaborative” approach to what is likely to be a growing challenge of long-term care for elderly South Africans, in a context of complex social change. At the other end of the age spectrum, Samuels shows what is at stake in terms of early intervention for children with disabilities; both Samuels and Hlongwane emphasise the importance of appropriate training in care work. Moving to the crucial lifespan role played by family physicians, Mash and Nash note that the holistic approach adopted by these physicians has been insufficiently considered in discussions of changes in healthcare provision, including in discussions about the implementation of the National Health Insurance system. Turning the gaze more directly on to the lived experience of healthcare providers themselves, Hoare and Mattison draw on the work of Jameton and Boss to discuss moral distress, which Hoare and Mattison describe as “a psychological and emotional response experienced by healthcare professionals when they believe they know the morally right course of action but are unable to act accordingly due to various constraints such as institutional policies, hierarchical structures, legal and ethical dilemmas, or conflicting values within a healthcare setting”.

Hoare and Mattison’s analysis of the question of moral distress in an overburdened healthcare system is important in itself, but it also returns the discussion series implicitly to other sectors. Friedman, as we have noted, problematises the concept of ‘service delivery’, rejecting a technicist, consumerist model, and we believe that in contemporary South Africa the concept of moral distress may be used across the board to describe some of the experiences of many trying to provide their best in terms of care, water, waste disposal and usage, electricity and services more generally within a less than fully enabling legal, policy, political, and social environment. No scientist or researcher can solve these challenges alone; we are grateful to all contributors to this discussion series for demonstrating the importance of thinking and working together.

## HOW TO CITE:

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