AUTHORS:
Maréve Biljohn[1]
Grey Magaiza[2]

AFFILIATIONS:
[1]Department of Public Administration and Management, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa
[2]Center for Gender and Africa Studies, University of the Free State, QwaQwa, South Africa

CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Grey Magaiza

EMAIL:
magaizaG@ufs.ac.za

Reimagining local government service delivery through the quadruple helix

Significance:

An effective service delivery praxis is an embedded requirement of public policy frameworks. The current service delivery failures, particularly at the local government level, have exposed public policy shortcomings and disrupted livelihoods in South Africa. At the core of an evidence-based policy-enabled service delivery regimen is a 'better life for all'. At a local government level, the integrated development plan of municipalities directs this 'better life' through service delivery priorities. By interrogating the service delivery and quadruple helix nexus, we provide future pathways to reimagine the country's local government service delivery praxis to achieve transformative aspirations and development futures.

Framing the quadruple helix

Regarded as an extension of the triple helix, which has widely been studied as an effective partnership model between academia, government and industry, the quadruple helix emphasises a fourth stakeholder to enhance innovative end-user service delivery experiences and collaboration.[1] The quadruple helix adds civic society to the three helices mentioned above to augment relational networks and advocacy for service delivery implementation. In the context of this Commentary, the quadruple helix encompasses the civic sector, industry, the public sector, and academia. In our local democracy, these stakeholders are central to keeping local government accountable regarding their legislative mandate. More recently, the accountability role of these stakeholders has expanded to co-producing services, finding alternative solutions to service delivery challenges, and taking responsibility for the self-delivery of public services. A quadruple helix creates a service delivery ecology embedded in effectively disseminating capacity, skills, expertise, and resources to address local government service delivery challenges to enhance service delivery. A quadruple helix is, therefore, suggested as an inclusive, dynamic and intertwined service delivery approach at the local government level.

Policy and the service delivery context

South Africa has been touted as a developmental state, meaning its resources support a state-led and inclusive development aspiration. The National Development Plan (NDP), which is the main policy vision of the state, evinces the need for a capable and developmental state to review and correct injustices of the past. The implementation of development policy in South Africa has remained consistent with an inclusive and justiciable policy pathway that has emphasised state-centric development plans. Beginning with the Reconstruction and Development, Growth Employment and Redistribution Strategy, Accelerated Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa, New Growth Plan and NDP, these plans have emphasised service delivery and macro-economic fundamentalism to drive societal transformation and livelihood transitions. The reality, however, has been that the triple challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality have steadily increased since 1994.[2] Therefore, in the 30 years of democracy, this policy context has seemingly not yielded the desired impact on service delivery. This is attributed to various factors emanating from the institutional internal environment supporting service delivery and its policy context. These factors include a lack of good governance, sound financial management, instability in key administrative positions, state capture and policy compliance. Ordinary citizens feel this lack of policy directly impacts their everyday lives regarding health, social, economic, environmental, educational, and basic services.[3]

At a local government level, this 30-year democratic narrative does not look much different for South African municipalities. To this end, the local government landscape is characterised by policy failures, poor audit outcomes, corruption, a lack of financial accountability, ailing service delivery infrastructure, cadre deployment, and key officials who lack appropriate financial skills and competencies.[4] It is an unfortunate continuity in failure as these municipalities are instrumental in addressing the country's triple challenge through developmental local government mandates. Although significant progress has been made towards improving the triple challenge and its impact on communities, municipalities cannot stay ahead in addressing development challenges. Twenty-six years after introducing the 1998 White Paper on Local Government, which set the scene for developmental local government, it seems municipalities are moving further away from living this vision. Several factors have contributed to the policy and developmental distance. The most noteworthy is the institutional distress, which exacerbates this distance and emanates from challenges in its internal environment. Such challenges include staff turbulence, poor infrastructure maintenance and planning, corruption, political abuse of power, the inability to execute basic functions and service delivery protests.[4] A call for alternative development roadmaps rooted in a service delivery praxis that delivers a 'better life for all' through a quadruple helix nexus is suggested to narrow this developmental local government gap and reposition municipalities with their mandate.

Dysfunctional or stable – South Africa's state of local government

Before re-imagining South African local government service delivery, taking stock of the state of municipalities is important. On 15 November 2023, the National Ministry of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs presented the State of Local Government Report to a Parliamentary Committee. The findings of this report indicate that out of the 257 municipalities (8 metropolitan, 44 district, and 205 local municipalities), 30 are stable, 54 are categorised as low risk, 107 as medium risk, and 66 as dysfunctional).[5] The dysfunctionality in these municipalities

originates from systemic factors such as (1) a weak administration, (2) poor maintenance of infrastructure, (3) poor management and collection of revenue, (4) inability to "perform on conditional grants", and (5) instability of councils.[5] The 66 dysfunctional municipalities represent a quarter of South Africa's municipalities. If their stability is not restored, they could become part of the 32 municipalities that have been placed under administration since 2016.

Placing municipalities under administration in the South African local government sphere is a phenomenon that has been around for a while. This practice supports restoring stability in affected municipalities. There are, however, some municipalities in which the administration has been instituted repeatedly and which relapse to their dysfunctional state after such support. The administration in municipalities occurs through invoking section 139 of the Constitution, which permits the provincial executive to intervene in municipalities.[6] As a last resort, such intervention could stem from the inability of a municipality to fulfil its legislative obligation, including the approval of a budget and revenue-raising measures that will give effect to a budget.[6] Secondly, a crisis in the financial affairs of a municipality impacts its ability to meet its financial obligations; it has led to a material breach to provide essential services.[6] The 32 municipalities placed under administration are spread across eight of South Africa's nine provinces, with the majority falling within the category of local municipalities and six district municipalities.[5] Of concern is that, in 2022 alone, administration was instituted in 13 municipalities, which is significantly higher than in previous years.[5]

The deteriorating state of local government service delivery in some South African municipalities, amongst which are the dysfunctional ones and those placed under administration, is merely symptomatic of dysfunctional institutional systems that underpin its service delivery governance. If the crux of this symptomatic manifestation, which is seen daily in a lack of or poor service delivery, is not addressed, there will be a complete failure in these municipalities. These institutional systems are embedded in the local government service delivery system (social and technical), labour relations, financial management, and governance system of municipalities. Noteworthy regarding the functionality of these institutional systems is their recurring identification as challenges. In fact, a decade ago, this was identified in a previous State of Local Government in South Africa document by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs.[7] To this end, the recurring nature of institutional challenges related to financial management, governance, service delivery, and labour relations has resulted in it being prioritised by two South African local government reforms: the Local Government Turnaround Strategy[8] (introduced in 2009) and the Back-to-Basics campaign[9] (introduced in 2013).

My business, your business, everybody's business

Every South African should ask: What does the state (dysfunctional or stable) of local government have to do with me? The stability of the 257 municipalities affects South Africans from all sectors of society. Regardless of the quality of services, it impacts people's livelihoods, businesses' sustainability, and municipalities' ability to attract and retain investment. The quality, sustainability and responsiveness of local government service delivery are the gateway to development in the towns and cities governed by municipalities. Moreover, it determines the state of development in municipalities. The worsening service delivery climate has seen an increase in costs for the delivery of some services as the private sector begins to occupy the space that is supposed to be led by the state; examples include the provision of health care, education, and security. Although some South Africans might be in an economic position to explore alternative service delivery arrangements, such as going off-grid, alternative water resources, and refuse collection, a significant number of our 60 million population are not in an economic and financial position to resort to alternative servicing. These citizens' lives will be most adversely affected by failing municipal and institutional systems that cannot deliver services sustainably.

Given the state of local government service delivery in the country, it is apparent that municipalities cannot save themselves. In addition to the intergovernmental relations system, the broader capacity of society has become more and more requisite to the future sustainability, responsiveness and resilience of local government's institutional systems that drive service delivery. Such capacity is located in the quadruple helix of society beyond the institutional framework of local government. Compared to the traditional role of service users, which are merely service recipients, this quadruple helix of stakeholders fulfils an unconventional but contemporary role where they are more central to decision-making processes regarding service delivery, resourcing and impact. In this reimagined service delivery context, the quadruple helix is involved in finding and implementing innovative solutions to the systemic institutional challenges, such as the local government service delivery system, labour relations, and financial management, that result in the current state of service delivery. These stakeholders support the local government service delivery system through their own and societal resources. Aligned with more contemporary service delivery approaches, the quadruple helix also participates in co-planning, co-designing, co-delivering and co-evaluating services.

Recent developments in the local government service delivery landscape show that citizens are becoming more organised in taking responsibility for some services that municipalities are supposed to deliver. Industry and higher education institutions likewise support collaborations towards repurposing municipal capacity through training and development initiatives. This demonstrates a willingness from society to ensure that local government's service delivery system remains responsive and redefines society's current and future role in South Africa's local government service delivery landscape. However, the extent to which regional governments are open and ready for this role – which requires navigating institutional cultures, bureaucratic systems and the dynamics of the political-administrative interface – is uncertain.

Reimagining capacity for service delivery in South Africa

We emphasise that service delivery is the cornerstone of transformation and should be considered a national priority. Such transformation starts at a local government level, where the direct impact of service delivery is felt. An effective service delivery approach must go beyond a mechanistic emphasis and highlight holistic and integrated foci that clearly articulate acceptable indicators to monitor transformation milestones. These transformation milestones should address the institutional and systemic challenges affecting service delivery systems. Several pathways to make this possible are suggested. The first pathway is to return to basics, entrenched in delivering quality basic services. The service delivery system profoundly impacts local economic development in municipalities and contributes to the gross domestic product of provinces.

Moreover, sustainable service delivery affects the ability of established and small businesses to survive in the current economic climate. A return to the fundamentals of basic service delivery is critical to ensure responsive, effective, efficient and sustainable service delivery. Integral to this is revisiting whether municipalities can deliver the complete basket of services aligned with their mandate. This might require reconfiguring its service delivery mandate. Second, is the geographical size of areas municipalities must serve within their resource constraints. Municipalities serving smaller geographical areas might be part of its future construction to ensure effective and efficient service delivery.

The second pathway should be embedded in policies that enhance the institutional systems of local government pertaining to its service delivery system, labour relations, financial management, and governance system. Concerning its service delivery system, policies should equally prioritise the technical and social sub-systems for equitable service delivery. Whilst the technical sub-system is concerned with policies, procedures and processes that determine service delivery, the social sub-system relies on the participation of the quadruple helix in the co-production of services.[10] One of the major areas for improvement of the current service delivery system is the poor integration of inputs from its social sub-system in the co-production (co-planning, co-design, co-delivery and co-evaluation) of services. The quadruple helix stakeholders could

significantly address some of the local government's pressing service delivery challenges through their skills, expertise, and resources.

Recognising that not only established or formal sectors of society should play a role in addressing challenges is essential. Entrepreneurs and small businesses are equally vital in identifying solutions to service delivery improvements through new business ideas. Some of these businesses are part of the diverse and large base of active and engaged entrepreneurs in the critical service delivery sectors. These entrepreneurs' and small businesses' roles in service delivery should be facilitated through the right policies at the local government level. Given the local government's skills and capacity deficit to deliver some service priorities, this small business and quadruple stakeholders could become critical partners in delivering services without municipal capacity. Where these and other businesses become a delivery mechanism for municipal services, their appointment should be based on technical competence and capacity to deliver the procured services. Creating an effective entrepreneurial and business support ecology is a critical enabler for a functional service delivery environment designed to fulfil the transformative aspirations of the NDP 2030.

The third pathway is restoring stability in local government through its relationship with society. The nucleus of South Africa's capable and developmental state is located in the stability of its local government sphere. Restoring stability in this sphere relies heavily on its relationship with society and establishing a multi-level stakeholder engagement approach towards achieving the country's national goal of a capable and developmental state. This means building trust on multiple levels and rebranding local government as an engine of social transformation open to working with society to enhance its capacity to create public value. In a context of minimal trust, we suggest multiple stakeholder engagements through the quadruple helix led by the state to re-emphasise the transformative intentions of NDP 2030 and the importance of service delivery for community well-being. A consensus generation model on service delivery actions predicated on the shared mutual goals of poverty reduction, employment generation, and inequality reduction must be prioritised. Underpinning this consensus model will be an understanding that South Africa is a developmental state that must provide services for a just and equitable society. This means that the best skill sets in the country need to be employed and supported to navigate the current service delivery failures in municipalities. It also entails that policy implementation is left to a skilled and capacitated human resource core in collaboration with sectors and stakeholders from society. Examples from East Asia show how a capacitated human resource base can be integral to shifting a country's economic fortunes and ensuring an improved quality of life for a just and equitable society.

The fourth pathway relates to the technical skills, financial management challenges, and labour relations issues confronting the municipal administration. This would require a rethink of the role of skills development in South Africa's local government sphere and how such skills are developed and supplied in relation to these areas. As part of the quadruple helix stakeholders, the higher education sector needs to be a key ally to the developmental agenda of the state. While higher education must meet the needs of the NDP 2030, there is a need to prioritise focus areas in line with current and projected future labour and developmental demands of the state. From a local government perspective, particularly specialised skills are required to understand the dynamic requirements of the municipal environment and its communities. Higher education must

be complicit in producing skilled and trainable artisans and engineers who can maintain infrastructure and lead the service delivery revolution. This means creating a supportive policy and resource climate to increase the number of artisans and technicians in diverse engineering and science fields. Currently, there is an overemphasis on social science and administration at the Technical and Vocational Colleges (TVETs). Yet, the shortage of plumbers, boilermakers and other associated professionals has reached crisis levels. Adapting the German model of a strengthened TVET sector is important to ensure a capacitated human resource core to improve service delivery. Although there has been endless rhetoric on this, the main issue has been the poor implementation of the aspiration. TVETs have largely operated like very senior high schools and are not centres of innovation and invention.

Reflecting on 30 years of democracy and 26 years of developmental local government, there is a pressing need to revisit the state of local government in South Africa and its service delivery praxis. Looking back and forth, local government's stability and the extent to which it can stay resilient in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous service delivery environment is no longer vested in its own capacity, but that of society.

Declarations

We have no competing interests to declare. AI and LLMs were not used in the writing of this paper. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

References

1. Leydesdorff L. The triple helix, quadruple helix, …, and an N-tuple of helices: Explanatory models for analyzing the knowledge-based economy? J Knowl Econ. 2021;3(1):25–35. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13132-011-0049-41

2. Ukwandu C. South Africa as a developmental state: Is it a viable idea? Afr J Public Aff. 2019;11(2):41–62.

3. Bianchi C, Nasi G, Rivenbark WC. Implementing collaborative governance: Models, experiences, and challenges. Public Manag Rev. 2021;23(11):1851–1589. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2021.1878777

4. Reddy PS. Evolving local government in post-conflict South Africa: Where to? Local Econ. 2018;33(7):710–725. https://doi.org/10.1177/0269094218809079

5. South Africa's 32 most 'dysfunctional' municipalities. BusinessTech. 11 January 2024 [cited 2024 May 20]. Available from: https://businesstech.co.za/news/trending/741577/south-africas-32-most-dysfunctional-municipalities/

6. Republic of South Africa. Constitutions Act 108 of 1996. Pretoria: Government Printers; 1996.

7. Van der Waldt G, Venter A, Phutiagae K, Nealer E, Khalo T, Vyas-Doorgapersad S. Municipal management serving the people. 3rd ed. Cape Town: Juta; 2018.

8. Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs. State of Local Government in South Africa: National State of Local Government Assessment. Working document. Pretoria: Government Printers; 2009.

9. Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs. Min Mec Briefing: The Local Government Turnaround Strategy. Pretoria: Government Printers; 2010.

10. Biljohn M. Social innovation and service delivery by local government [PhD thesis]. Bloemfontein: University of the Free State; 2018.