

Looking at Service Delivery from a Social Justice Perspective: A Case of a Selected Local Municipality in Limpopo Province

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses service delivery from a Social Justice standpoint in a local municipality selected from the Limpopo Province. Employing case study qualitative research design, the study gathered data through face-to-face interviews with municipal officials and residents which were then supplemented by document review of the municipal plans, budgets, and reports. The results show that service delivery is not consistent and is affected by governance problems, lack of institutional capacity, shortage of financial resources, and a low level of public involvement. Not only that, but the structural inequalities also caused by the spatial planning of the past deepen the divide to such an extent that the areas that were left out in the past become the ones that do not get basic services for a long time. The research discovers that these systemic deficiencies erode social justice's distributive and procedural elements. The article offers several suggestions for overcoming these problems starting with an agreement that emphasizes distributive justice in the allocation of resources, raising the standards of governance and accountability, making public participation a regular feature of people's lives, and carrying out the spatial interventions designed to eliminate the effects of the spatial inequalities. The study argues for the urgency of municipalities embracing justice-oriented strategies that facilitate not only technical service provision but also the provision of equitable, inclusive, and sustainable services for all residents.

Keywords: social justice, local governance, equity, public participation, spatial inequality

INTRODUCTION

Service delivery has been the main problem of South African local municipalities for many years. Municipalities in areas which were deprived in the past have been the most affected by socio economic inequalities that have been deeply rooted there. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) and the Municipal Systems Act (2000) redefine municipalities as developmental institutions instead of mere administrative entities whose role is to promote social justice by providing equitable access to basic services, make up for past disparities, and increase the standard of living of the people (Reddy, 2016; Kanyane, 2014). Despite these provisions, in many instances, the result of service delivery has been below expectation as the communities from the rural and peripheral areas have been the ones to suffer the most from delayed, substandard, or complete absence of services, whereas central or politically influential wards are the ones that benefit the most (Shai, 2017; Matloga, 2023). This state of affairs not only erodes the confidence of the public in the government but also causes social unrest and is the reason for calling service delivery protests more often. These protest actions emphasize the need for addressing the structural, institutional, and normative aspects of municipal service provision (Zerihun & Mashigo, 2022).

The situation in the Limpopo Province due to its characteristics of high rurality and socio-economic vulnerability is no different from those described above. Financial and human resources shortages limited institutional capacity, and weak governance structures have become the major factors that have stalled the progress of municipalities in the region in their quest to provide services equitably (Selepe, 2023). However, it is not only about technical and administrative failures but also social injustices that are at the root of these phenomena: the communities which were marginalized historically have been intentionally deprived of resources and have been excluded from the areas of participation where they could give their input to decision making processes (Joseph & Williams, 2022). The enduring spatial and socio-economic inequalities that have been inherited from the

apartheid era planning only serve to heighten the disparities thus making the issue of justice the core of any evaluation of municipal service delivery.

With that in mind, the employment of a Social Justice lens in the examination of service delivery is a paramount instrument in discerning the fairness, equity, and finally, inclusiveness of municipal governance. As such, this research investigates the workings of a local municipality in the Limpopo Province with respect to service delivery seeking to unveil both the structural and procedural mechanisms that either facilitate or hinder the access to services being equal. Moreover, it examines the views of the community regarding service provision to have an understanding of how the people interpret the impact of municipal decisions on their everyday lives. The integration of empirical results with Social Justice Theory, especially distributive and procedural dimensions, serves this study's purpose to shed light on the normative deficits in service delivery, to realize the institutional and governance challenges, and to suggest ways of getting municipal practices in line with the principles of fairness, inclusion, and equity. In essence, this research stands at the intersection of theory and practice as it deepens the understanding of justice-oriented service delivery and simultaneously provides policy and governance reforms supported by the research findings that will lead to sustainable and inclusive development in marginalized contexts.

Theoretical Framework

A Social Justice perspective offers a compelling interpretive lens for investigating the fairness, inclusiveness, and equity of municipal service delivery. This research relies on three interconnected theoretical concepts Distributive Justice, Procedural Justice, and Structural or Transformative Justice that are each based on different scholarly traditions. These combined theoretical frameworks help the researchers to understand not only the results of municipal decision making but also the processes, power relations, and institutional dynamics that influence service delivery in South African municipalities.

Distributive Justice

Distributive Justice Theory is focused on the fair distribution of materials, services, and opportunities. It establishes social justice principles most closely associated with John Rawls in his landmark book *A Theory of Justice* (1971) where the author suggests that proper societies must be structured based on two fundamental rules: firstly, all people must have equal basic liberties; secondly, social and economic inequalities should be arranged in such a way that they benefit the least advantaged. Rawls' "justice as fairness" gives an ethical basis for scrutiny of whether municipal resource allocation like water infrastructure, sanitation, electricity, and road improvement as a means of promoting fair equity.

Supporting Rawls, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum through the Capability Approach, change the focus from material distribution to the freedoms and capabilities that each person needs if they are to live a dignified human life. Sen maintains that justice should be measured in terms of genuine opportunities rather than mere formal rights, whereas Nussbaum offers a list of fundamental human capabilities which are to be fostered by public institutions.

In municipalities, this point of view is very well in line with the service delivery standard which recognizes that delivery of services should be a means of enhancing the real freedoms of the citizens such as healthcare, the ability to move freely, and community participation.

The contributions of philosophy of the past, for instance, Aristotle's idea of proportional equality and David Miller's research on the principles of need, desert, and equality, also help to deepen the understanding of distributive justice framework. These theories unveil the critical question for municipal analysis: Are services being distributed in a way that not only compensates for past marginalisation but also addresses the inequalities of the present?

Procedural Justice

While Distributive Justice focuses on the results, Procedural Justice, on the other hand, looks at the fairness of the processes by which decisions are made. The founding figures of Procedural Justice, John Thibaut and Laurens Walker, introduced the notion through investigations of legal proceedings, whereby they assumed that

the fair processes considerably affect people's views of the institutions' legitimacy. Tom Tyler expanded their research and his seminal study on Public Administration shows that citizens comply with the law and trust institutions more when they feel respected, listened to, and involved in decision making.

Leventhal's principles for procedural justice consistency, accuracy, representativeness, correctability, and ethicality are additional instruments for dissecting municipal governance. These standards are closely linked with South Africa's laws, which focus much on participatory democracy and its implementation through devices such as ward committees, Integrated Development Planning (IDP) forums, and public consultations. Unfortunately, even though these offices exist officially, participation is mostly turned into a mere performance, a process controlled by experts, or dominated by political elites raising the issue of which voices really influence municipal priorities.

According to this theory, procedural justice might give an answer to the question about whether communities have the same chance to impact decisions that directly affect their access to basic services, which is, indeed, an indispensable aspect of local governance legitimacy assessment.

Structural and Transformative Justice

Though distributive and Procedural Justice deal with allocation and participation, Structural Justice, on the other hand, looks at the societal and institutional aspects that have been around for a long time and are the major cause of inequity.

Nancy Fraser, a leading justice theorist, maintains that genuine Social Justice entails not only redistribution (economic inequities) but also recognition (cultural and political exclusion) addressed simultaneously. Eventually, Fraser's work on transformative justice points to the necessity of changing those structural factors that continue to cause the disadvantage, meaning that this viewpoint is highly relevant when dealing with municipal governance after apartheid.

In a like manner, Iris Marion Young faults traditional distributive models for their failure to recognize systemic oppression that is deeply rooted in institutions, decision making structures, and spatial arrangements. Young's research shows how, for instance, municipal boundaries, planning systems, and governance cultures might unintentionally be recreating inequalities, particularly in the once neglected rural and peri urban areas.

Among Critical Theory, ideas from Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth can also be found that help to extend and deepen this point of view. For example, Habermas' model of communicative action stresses the requirement of rational, inclusive talks for democratic legitimacy to be formed thus emphasizing the main feature of participation going beyond procedural formalities. And similarly, Honneth's theory of recognition also specifies the moral side of respect and inclusion in public institutions.

When talking about the South African municipalities, these Structural and Critical justice theories are instrumental in explaining how the following elements, i.e. historical spatial inequities, political patronage networks, capacity constraints, and governance dysfunctions, coalesce to determine the outcomes of service delivery. They point out that justice in local government cannot come just through better technical efficiency; it has to do with a structural change of the systems, institutions, and power relations that govern service provision.

Relevance to the Study

This theoretical framework, by integrating the ideas of Rawls, Sen, Nussbaum, Tyler, Fraser, Young, Habermas, and others, lays down a solid and comprehensive base for the analysis of service delivery in the chosen Limpopo municipality. Distributive Justice allows one to judge if services are fairly distributed in different wards; Procedural Justice questions the fairness and openness of the participation processes; and Structural Justice uncovers the deep rooted institutional and historical forces that continue to cause the inequality. All these points of view lead to the research questions of this study and serve as a basis for linking the interviewees' accounts to a wider theoretical conception of justice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public services in the local government units of South Africa have been described in various ways, essentially, the delivery is both a technical and political operation that has been influenced by the past bias, the leadership's ability and the ethical principles of social justice. Recent studies have been revealing that municipal services are closely linked to apartheid spatial planning which has led to less favourable access to basic utilities like water, sanitation, and electricity as well as infrastructure such as roads and housing (Turok, 2021; Mabin, 2020). Hence, the present-day service delivery results must be seen against the background of the past where the disadvantaged communities that are predominantly in rural areas of Limpopo still face systemic exclusion (Christopher, 2022).

Most of the reviewed literatures have looked at the delivery of services as the main function of the local developmental government, a blueprint used in South Africa for undoing the past evil and promoting the new age of development (Pieterse, 2019; Harrison & Todes, 2017). The developmental local government rests on the principles of being responsive, accountable, involving the community, and fairly redistributing the resources (Department of Cooperative Governance, 2020). However, the researchers reveal that the realization of these virtues is still on a low level, whereby local governments are usually limited due to lack of capacity, poor management structures, politicisation of appointments, and having a small fiscal space (Cameron, 2018; Madumo, 2022). The problems of these systemic diseases are more felt in rural local governments, where the service delivery inefficiencies are at their highest (Nzimakwe, 2021).

The reviewed literature has also underlined that the involvement of the public is the main stay of governance that is geared towards social justice. Arnstein's (1969) "Ladder of Citizen Participation" is still the main framework of the presented arguments, and modern scholars in South Africa consider that municipal interactions are at best tokenistic consultation and at worst they reproduce existing power structures with no impact on the community (Ngamlana & Mathoho, 2020; Williams, 2021). Public involvement is crucial in participatory democracy, but in Limpopo, the popularity of public forums such as ward committees and Integrated Development Plan (IDP) processes is seriously affected by the low turnout of people, dominance by the elite, as well as few and weak feedback mechanisms, the factors that make them powerless to push the Social Justice agenda further (Mashamaite, 2020).

Different sets of writings also look at the problem of service provision which reflects on people's Distributive and Procedural Justice. Municipal resources allocations have been analysed under the light of Rawlsian concepts of justice and fairness which have brought to attention that local governments are not doing enough to prioritize the most disadvantaged groups of the community despite their commitment to them in policy (Rawls, 1971; Kumi & Msuya, 2018). Likewise, Fraser's (2008) three-legged framework redistribution, recognition, and representation have become popular among South African scholars studying governance practices (Hlatshwayo, 2021). The authors draw attention to the continuous lack of recognition of citizens in rural areas, whose needs and realities are often disregarded during the bureaucratic planning process.

Currently, the service delivery protests which have become quasi permanent features in most parts of South Africa, can be seen as a loud call for attention by local governments and evidence of community anger (Alexander et al., 2018; Booysen, 2021). It is evident from the studies that protests usually follow water supply that has not been consistent, decaying infrastructure, unfulfilled municipal promises, and lack of transparency in decision making that have been the people's grievances for a long time (Runciman, 2020). In addition, to that, there is also research evidence that in Limpopo, protest movement is mainly about voices being raised against structural marginalisation, patronage networks, and trust in municipal leadership declining (Mathebula & Sebola, 2021).

Another literature focusing on Limpopo's local authorities elaborates the point that service delivery is the outcome of geography and administration. Rural local governments are faced with long settlement patterns, low revenue sources, high rates of poverty, and reliance on grants from the national government (Sekgala, 2022; Nzimakwe, 2021). These limitations at times prevent them from doing the long-term planning and building of infrastructure. Nonetheless, the literature also brings out the community-based monitoring and participatory budgeting as innovations, which if properly carried out, have shown promise in deepening accountability and fairness (Mukonza & Twala, 2020).

To sum up, literature reviewed suggests that the delivery of services in local governments is tightly interwoven with the issues of (social) justice, fairness, and democratic representation. The legal frameworks in South Africa strongly support the ideals of equality and inclusion but the real-life situations are always revealing the policy practice gaps. The reforms that have been introduced thus far have not been able to take full effect and have left the door open for injustices to keep existing as a result of which Social Justice is not only a normative goal but also an instrumental tool for understanding the power relations, participation and resource allocation that influence the day to day experiences of development especially in those provinces like Limpopo where service delivery has become a challenge of the highest order.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employed a qualitative design, drawing from interpretivist and critical social science traditions. Qualitative inquiry is especially effective in investigating service delivery from a Social Justice perspective as it opens power, lived experience, and structural inequity's themes through participants constructed meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Through its interpretivist component, the study gained a deeper insight into how the community members and municipal officials understand the justice, inclusion, and the ability of the local service delivery processes to respond to their needs. On the other hand, the critical perspective helped identify those systemic and historical factors that, according to the authors, continue to dominate municipal governance.

Research Setting and Context

This study was carried out in a single local municipality in the Limpopo Province that is characterized by rural settlements, a high backlog of service delivery, and limited administrative capacity. Limpopo is a suitable case due to the persistent spatial inequalities and uneven developmental trajectories resulting from apartheid era planning (Christopher, 2022). The selected municipality is teeming with service delivery protests, infrastructural decay, and budgetary constraints, thus, making it a suitable place for investigating how justice gets negotiated in everyday governance.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling method was used in selecting participants who were rich in information and could provide diverse views on service delivery and Social Justice. Purposive sampling is the right method for qualitative research, as it focuses on the depth, subtlety, and the insight of a particular context rather than on statistical representation (Palinkas et al., 2015). The sample is made up of three categories: (1) municipal officials involved in planning, infrastructure, budgeting, and community participation processes; (2) ward councillors and committee members; and (3) community members living in villages that were historically disadvantaged through the unequal distribution of resources. Participants were chosen based on their firsthand experience with service delivery processes, their participation in decision making structures, and their ability to critically reflect on issues of fairness and equity.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected through Semi Structured Interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Semi structured interviews provided the opportunity for flexibility, probes, and the uncovering of person's subtle experiences thus, at the same time, ensuring the uniformity of the interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interview guide contained the following themes: fairness in resource distribution, experiences with municipal responsiveness, participation barriers, and the infrastructural deficits' implications.

Two community focus groups were held to gather the collective stories and common experiences of service delivery. FGDs enabled the rich discussions where the participants could argue the municipal performance, state their grievances, and point out the community specific inequities. This method is in line with Social Justice research, which is based on dialogical engagement and collective reflection (Freire, 1970). All the interviews and FGDs were done with audio recording, informed consent and were in a mix of English, Sepedi, and Xitsonga depending on participant's preferred language.

Data Analysis

The research used thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is an excellent tool for uncovering patterns of meaning in qualitative datasets. It is widely used in Social Justice oriented research to bring to the fore structural inequalities and the lived experiences of people. The data were transcribed verbatim, then the researchers coded the data both inductively and deductively. Inductive coding gave way to the themes that came directly from the participants' stories, while deductive coding was limited to theoretical constructs such as redistribution, recognition, participation, and inequality, derived from Rawls (1971), Fraser (2008), and Sen (2009).

The analysis moved through six phases: acquaintance with the data, first coding, theme conceptualization, theme appraisal, theme specification, and writing the analytical narrative. The researchers also kept reflexive notes throughout the process to recognize their positionality, lessen the possibility of bias, and increase the transparency of the analysis. The themes were checked across different participant groups to see whether they were consistent and to have the triangulation of perspectives.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, the authors have applied the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was promoted not only through prolonged engagement in the field but also through member checking with chosen participants and triangulation across data sources. Transferability was brought about through the thick description of the research context and the socio politics of participants' environment. Dependability was guaranteed through the recording of an audit trail that included the decisions made during coding, analytic memos, and methodological reflections. Confirmability was sought through reflexivity and peer debriefing to confirm that the data, not the researcher's assumptions, were the basis for the interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

The research received ethical clearance from Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC). Participants made informed consent, and they were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. In all transcripts and reporting, pseudonyms were utilized. The study complied with the ethical principles of respect, and beneficence, which are of utmost importance in research involving communities that have been marginalized and are usually left out of the decision-making processes. Participation was done in such a manner that it did not strengthen the existing power imbalances but rather gave the participants the opportunity to express their views in a respectful and empowering way.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results depict intricate and interrelated factors that influence the provision of services in the municipality of the study. The stories of the participants brought to the fore the presence of inequalities that had persisted, lack of participation, inefficiencies in governance, and bad relations between the community and the municipality. Four main themes dominated the discussion: (1) persistent inequalities in the distribution of resources; (2) Inconsistent Municipal Responsiveness and Accountability; (3) Constrained Public Participation and Limited Voice; and (4) Declining Public Trust and Social Fragmentation. These themes are examined here, relying on the participants' descriptions of the situations, and seen through the lens of Rawls (1971), Sen (2009), and Fraser (2008) Social Justice theories.

Persistent Inequities in Resource Distribution

Community members repeatedly stated that the delivery of services mirrors the inequalities that existed in the past and that continue to exist in the villages. A great number of the community members voiced that they were "left behind," especially those living in the most isolated areas. A person from Village A emotionally spoke out this thought:

"If you consider our locality, it's quite obvious that we do not get equal treatment like other villages. They installed pipes five years ago, yet we are waterless. It's as if development ceases as soon as it gets to the tar road."

This conforms to Fraser's (2008) idea of misrecognition whereby the marginalized groups are, by the very structure, denied full membership in the political community. Participants attributed the disparities to the archaic infrastructures, poor spatial planning, and insufficient municipal management. Some of these differences were also recognized by the municipal officials among whom one said:

"We allocate resources or give priority as per the IDP but the truth is that some villages are very far behind because a single budget cannot meet all the needs at once."

This statement is in line with the research findings that indicate that rural municipalities are burdened with backlogs that are made worse by their limited revenue base and high levels of poverty (Sekgala, 2022; Nzimakwe, 2021). Yet, the narratives of the community reveal that the problem is not just money; they see the inequities as being systematic and unjust. A youth participant asserted:

"They always say there is no budget, but you see projects popping up in places where councillors have their influence. What kind of justice is that?"

Which is in line with Rawls's (1971) argument that fairness entails that inequalities should work to the advantage of the least advantaged something that participants have been consistently saying is not the case.

Inconsistent Municipal Responsiveness and Accountability

The second issue raised by participants revolved around the local government's irregular effort to answer community demands. A few of the informants shared that they had experienced delayed responses to their complaints about service delivery, promises that have not been kept, as well as poor communication. An old, aged resident emphasized:

"We raise issues, but they vanish. You come today, tomorrow, next week nobody cares."

Local government officials recognized the delays but said that they were due to lack of staff and administrative bottlenecks, as demonstrated in this remark:

"There are times when we cannot quickly respond because we are in charge of several wards, and the volume of complaints is more than our capacity to handle them."

Though municipal capacity issues have been largely acknowledged in the literature (Cameron, 2018; Madumo, 2022), participants argued that the delays were a sign of governance weaknesses at a deeper level rather than just logistical problems. Their frustration is especially related to procedural justice that focuses on fairness in the making of decisions (Kumi & Msuya, 2018). Residents believed that the inconsistent way their requests were met led to the neglect of the basic principle that all citizens should be considered equally. The dissatisfaction with the system of government often resulted in a complete disengagement from formal participatory processes or, in some places, in the taking of protest action. One of the participants said:

"People do not protest for the sake of it they do it because they have been disregarded for a long time."

This is in line with the findings of the recent study that points to government inaction as the major cause of service delivery protests (Runciman, 2020; Booysen, 2021).

Constrained Public Participation and Limited Voice

It is a fact that the municipality has official participation platforms like ward committees and IDP meetings, however, the participants reported that these agencies largely act as mere symbols rather than being real and

functional space. Arnstein (1969) had criticised tokenism in participation, and this was obvious in the participant's experiences.

One ward committee member gave an explanation:

"The meetings are held, but decisions have already been made. We just agree to what is presented to us without any discussion."

The feeling was shared by ordinary residents who thought that the participation mechanisms were not only lacking in transparency but also in inclusiveness. A young woman said:

"We attend IDP meetings, but our problems do not get included in the final plan. It makes you feel that your voice counts for nothing."

From the Social Justice perspective, this is a failure to represent, according to Fraser's (2008) framework. If communities do not have a real say in the decisions, then justice is procedural rather than substantive.

Municipal officials defended the system by saying:

"The difficulty is not that people are left out. The trouble is that very few come to the meetings, and some community members only arrive at the end of the process."

However, blaming residents for the problem of attendance disregards the existence of structural obstacles such as the time of the meetings, language, transport difficulties, and lack of feedback mechanisms all of which have been widely referred to in the participation literature (Ngamlana & Mathoho, 2020; Williams, 2021). Some participants reported the presence of political interference in their ward committees and said:

"party politics sometimes decide who is heard"

This is a continuation of the previous research that shows how elite capture is one of the factors that lead to the decline of participatory governance in rural municipalities (Mashamaite, 2020).

Declining Public Trust and Social Fragmentation

The combined impact of unfair delivery of services, unresponsive governance, and superficial participation leading to the loss of public trust in the municipality. Respondents showed that they were quite sceptical of the local leadership and one of the community members is quoted saying that:

"We don't believe what they say anymore. Every year they promise development, but nothing changes. Trust is already gone."

Youth participants commented that they were disheartened and that they were not considered:

"We feel like we are strangers in our municipality. They talk of development, but we do not see it."

The municipal officials admitted to declining trust but partially blamed it on misinformation spread through social media. While that may be partially true, the participant stories show that it is their experiences that have led to mistrust rather than rumours. Declining trust is comprehensively evidenced in the research concerning local governance in South Africa (Alexander et al., 2018; Mathebula & Sebola, 2021). Injustice be it perceived or real undermines the authority of institutions.

From the point of view of Social Justice, distrust may be seen as a symptom of failure of the system in the areas of redistribution, recognition, and representation, which Fraser (2008) considers the fundamental components of justice.

Synthesis of Findings

Firstly, these thematic elements individually speak to different challenges a municipality faces in realising and actualising the principles of Social Justice as the core of the South African democratic governance frameworks.

While the officials portray the situation as one of lack of resources and overwhelming work in the administration, the stories of the people reveal that there are injustices based on their lived realities which have resulted from inequitable distribution, limited participation, and poor accountability. The findings confirm Sen's (2009) view that justice is not accomplished simply through the presence of institutions which are seemingly fair on paper, but rather through the real freedom and capabilities of the people as they live on the ground. In this municipality, that freedom of the people, especially of the marginalized villages, is still limited and constrained.

CONCLUSION

The research revealed how the service delivery in the selected Limpopo municipality had been mainly influenced by the local socio-economic conditions. Among these were highly unequal structural relations persisting over time, disproportionate allocation of resources, low level participation and dwindling confidence of the public in local authority's factors, which together spelt the Social Justice struggle in local governance. People's stories voiced a paradox: on the one hand, post-Apartheid South Africa boasts legislations and is committed through its policies very visibly to equity and inclusive development; on the other hand, the actual situations in the rural areas have been found to be suffering from a lack of basic infrastructure, sporadic municipal service delivery, and even tokenistic participation in local governance.

The results also echo arguments of Rawls, Sen, and Fraser, which advocate that justice should be looked at not only via institutional mechanisms but also through the real access to resources, recognition of human rights and representation of people's voices in decision making. In cases where people interpret their necessities as being sidelined, their contributions overlooked and their lives denied, social justice becomes sporadic and social bonds weaken. Hence, the final point of their research is that Social Justice could only be real if it were combined with excellent administrative capabilities, or at least it implies a system break where governance moves to fairness, close cooperation with citizens, accountability and the redistribution of resources that flow first to those groups that have been historically disadvantaged.

Without a remediation of the systemic barriers, service delivery problems will be hanging around like ghosts, along with community irritability that will be reaching the climax and thus, the developmental promise of local governments will be, as it always was, only a distant dream.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, the research has drawn up a list of interventions aimed at not only improving equitable service delivery but also at implanting Social Justice in municipal governance. Firstly, a municipality should have been the one to implement a redistributive approach to planning which focuses on villages that are not only neglected but also historically marginalized. Such a plan would be bolstered by resource allocation criteria that are transparent and open to regular public disclosure of budget decisions. Secondly, re-energizing participatory frameworks will need, among other things, the empowerment of townships through training, better communication between these bodies and the public, and the setting wherein participation can be made a visible and integral part of the IDP processes thus, implementation of Fraser's principles of recognition and representation.

Moreover, making the municipality more responsive is quite needed and the ways of doing that may include building the complaint systems that work in real time, upgrading the skills of the frontline staff and, among other things, making the accountability measures for delayed responses institutionalised. To regain the public trust, community feedback forums need to be a regular feature of the municipality's engagement with people and in that kind of setting, apart from the compliance meetings, free talks and co-created solutions to service delivery problems become possible. At last, but not least, the support from provincial and national government is pretty much imperative in overcoming long standing capacity issues that trouble rural municipalities, and it can be

provided in the way of a carefully planned and adequately sourced program of grants, technical help, and monitoring frameworks with emphasis on Social Justice outcomes rather than procedural compliance only. Taken together, these proposals open the door to a governing model which puts at its core not only fairness, but also the continuous and accountable involvement in local decision making as being the two of the main pillars needed for sustainable and just service delivery in rural municipalities of South Africa.

A key limitation is that this case study is limited to a single municipality, restricting the generalizability of findings to other contexts in Limpopo or South Africa. The study relies heavily on qualitative interviews, which may introduce subjectivity or bias if participant selection was narrow. It also does not fully explore the political dynamics between municipal and provincial structures. Furthermore, the lack of quantitative data limits the ability to measure service delivery gaps systematically or assess the scale of resource constraints. However, these limitations are left hitherto left open for further research

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