"Spare the Rod and Spoil the Child": navigating consequence management in local government transformation in South Africa

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Background: The phrase "Spare the Rod and Spoil the Child" aptly describes the state of South African local government, where the lack of consequence management has fostered systemic inefficiencies, corruption, and declining service delivery. Municipalities envisioned as strategic focal points for developmental governance under the White Paper on Local Government (1998) have become unresponsive and plagued by governance failures.

Objective: This study investigates how the absence of accountability has contributed to service delivery deficiencies in 10 selected municipalities. It also explores strategies to implement consequence management to address these challenges.

Methods: A qualitative research design was adopted, involving semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 50 participants, including municipal managers and community leaders.

Results: Thematic analysis revealed key issues, including weak institutional frameworks, a culture of protecting transgressors, and resistance to reform. These challenges perpetuate inefficiency, poor compliance with legislation, and political interference, undermining municipalities' ability to fulfill their developmental mandates.

Conclusion: The findings emphasize the need for robust consequence management frameworks to curb financial mismanagement and enforce compliance with governance standards. Strategies such as strengthening performance management systems, fostering ethical leadership, and integrating digital innovations are proposed. Breaking the culture of impunity and institutionalizing community participation are also highlighted as critical reforms.

Implications: By framing local government inefficiencies as the result of "spoiling the child" through lax governance, this study provides actionable insights for policymakers and governance practitioners. It offers practical recommendations to enhance accountability, restore public trust, and transform municipalities into responsive and effective service providers.

KEYWORDS

Spare the Rod and Spoil the Child, consequence management, local government transformation, South Africa, accountability, discipline, governance

1 Introduction

Consequence management is essential for promoting accountability, ensuring efficiency, and upholding public trust in local governance, as emphasized in the Republic of South Africa (1996) and the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA) (Republic of South Africa, 1998). The Republic of South Africa (1998) envisioned municipalities as strategic focal points for developmental governance due to their proximity to local communities and their mandate to address community needs effectively. However, South African local government has long been regarded as a "spoilt child" where the "rod" of accountability has been spared, resulting in widespread bureaucratic failures and governance inefficiencies. This metaphor, encapsulated in the phrase "Spare the Rod and Spoil the Child," highlights the systemic lack of consequence management that has allowed transgressions to persist without adequate repercussions.

The Auditor-General's reports from 2019 to 2023 reveal systemic failures in local government, including non-compliance with legislation, financial mismanagement, and weak oversight structures (Auditor-General South Africa, 2020, 2023). These shortcomings have fostered a culture of impunity, where unresponsive municipal structures and poor implementation of servant leadership have exacerbated service delivery deficiencies (Fourie and Malan, 2023). The absence of robust accountability mechanisms has allowed political and bureaucratic transgressors to act without consequence, thereby undermining the developmental goals envisioned in the National Development Plan (NDP).

Current research highlights the critical role of consequence management in addressing governance inefficiencies. For example, Mamokhere (2023) underscores the need for performance management systems to curb financial mismanagement, while Chili et al. (2023) emphasize the detrimental impact of political interference on service delivery. However, much of the existing research has not delt with the subject of consequent management in detail, thus failing to provide actionable strategies for implementing consequence management within municipalities in South Africa. Furthermore, little is known about how weak governance frameworks perpetuate systemic inefficiencies, particularly in the context of institutional and political resistance.

Drawing on the New Public Management (NPM) theory, this study explores how the absence of consequence management has transformed local government into a "spoilt child," triggering service delivery deficiencies in 10 selected South African municipalities. The study also examines strategies to implement consequence management, addressing the challenges and opportunities for creating a culture of accountability and responsive governance. The following empirical questions informs this study.

After this introduction, the paper is structured as follows. The literature review explores consequence management and governance. It identifies key gaps in existing research. The methodology outlines the research design and data analysis methods. The findings and discussion analyze challenges such as unreformed institutions, comradeship, and weak performance systems. The implications propose reforms including ethical leadership and institutional modernization. The conclusion summarizes the findings and suggests areas for future research.

i. How does the absence of consequence management influence service delivery in local municipalities?
ii. What strategies can be implemented to enhance accountability and governance effectiveness?

After this introduction, the paper is structured as follows. The state of municipalities in South Africa is discussed. The literature review explores New Public Management (NPM) theory, consequence management, and governance. It identifies key gaps in existing research. The methodology outlines the research design and data analysis methods. The findings and discussion analyze challenges such as unreformed institutions, comradeship, and weak performance systems. The implications propose reforms including ethical leadership and institutional modernization. The conclusion summarizes the findings and suggests areas for future research.

2 The state of municipalities: reflections on the Auditor-General's reports

The Auditor-General's (AG) reports from 2019 to 2023 highlight systemic failures in local government (LG) accountability, consequence management, and legislative compliance, significantly impacting service delivery and financial sustainability in South African municipalities. A consistent theme across the reports is the lack of accountability structures, which weakens governance and undermines transparency. For instance, the 2022–23 report reveals that only 34 municipalities achieved clean audits, highlighting minimal progress in addressing accountability failures (Auditor-General South Africa, 2023). Non-compliance with critical legislation, including the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA) and the Municipal Systems Act (MSA), has persisted, with 86% of municipalities reporting material non-compliance findings in the 2019–20 financial year (Auditor-General South Africa, 2020, 2022). Financial mismanagement remains rampant, as municipalities incur unauthorized, irregular, and fruitless expenditures. For example, irregular expenditure reached R26 billion in 2019–20, alongside 128 cases of fraud or improper conduct in supply chain management (Auditor-General South Africa, 2020). These lapses in governance are compounded by weak oversight mechanisms, such as non-functional internal audit units and municipal public accounts committees, as noted in 2022–23 (Auditor-General South Africa, 2023).

Furthermore, corruption and political meddling exacerbate local government inefficiencies, fostering a culture of impunity and undermining service delivery. Political instability within councils disrupts municipal operations and delays service delivery initiatives (Auditor-General South Africa, 2021). Infrastructure management failures are also pervasive, with 72% of audited projects in 2022–23 exhibiting delays, cost overruns, or substandard quality (Auditor-General South Africa, 2023). These shortcomings have directly contributed to water and electricity losses, deteriorating infrastructure, and growing public dissatisfaction. The AG's 2020–21 report emphasized the absence of robust consequence management to address material irregularities and non-compliance, leading to recurrent governance failures

(Auditor-General South Africa, 2021). Addressing these systemic issues requires comprehensive reforms to enhance accountability, strengthen internal controls, and ensure adherence to legislative frameworks. Such measures are essential for improving service delivery and restoring public trust in local government.

Weak governance refers to the inability of institutions to uphold accountability, transparency, the rule of law, and responsiveness, resulting in administrative inefficiencies, corruption, and worsening delivery of services (Kaufmann, 2019). At the local government level, poor governance is actualised in the form of poor oversight mechanisms, poor leadership, institutional capacity, and the erosion of ethical values, all of which cumulatively undermine public service delivery and citizens' trust (Masiya et al., 2021). In South Africa, this is observed in the continued lack of respect for audit outcomes, inability to implement consequence management, and politically linked manipulation of procurement processes (Fourie and Malan, 2023). Weak governance, hence, is not merely structurally related but also a normative failure in terms of ethical leadership and institutional integrity that calls for systemic reform to reinstate the legitimacy and functionality of the institutions within the municipalities.

2.1 Theoretical perspectives: new public management theory

This study employs the New Public Management Theory. In this study, accountability and service delivery in municipalities in South Africa have been explored with the aid of the NPM Theory. The theory facilitates an analysis of the integration of performance-oriented management practices with innovative approaches at the local government level (Funck, 2020). The theory is relevant to municipal contexts, where the persistent governance challenges focus on efficiency, accountability, and citizen-centric service delivery.

NPM finds its origins in the work of scholars like Hood (1991) and Osborne (1992), emphasizing efficiency, market-driven mechanisms, and decentralization in public sector management. The core underlying basis of NPM underlines the use of private sector practices in adopting performance evaluations and competitive allocation of resources to perform better in delivering public services (Aligbe, 2024). According to Hood (1991), the essential elements of NPM include accountability, transparency, and a results-oriented approach to management. Osborne (1992) press further entrepreneurial governance and innovation to meet gaps in service delivery. The NPM explains the aspects relating to how accountability and efficiency are enhanced within municipalities via market-driven approaches and the involvement of citizens through performance management and digital innovation (Nyamori, 2023).

The application of NPM in this study is guided by its ability to explain the structural and operational drawbacks that hinder service delivery in municipalities in South Africa. Schoeman and Chakwizira (2023) applied this theory to examine performance management tools as mechanisms for enhancing municipal efficiency. Similarly, Shava and Vyas-Doorgapersad (2022) highlighted the relevance of NPM in developing digital

innovation and accountability within local government. NPM is particularly suited for examining service delivery challenges, given its focus on aligning public sector operations with efficiency and responsiveness. The theory's emphasis on measurable outcomes and accountability aligns closely with the research problem, addressing South African municipalities' systemic inefficiencies and governance lapses.

This study applies NPM to investigate how accountability and service delivery could be improved in municipal governance. NPM, therefore, offers a theoretical perspective on how performance-based management systems, decentralized structures, and market-oriented practices can overcome persistent failures in local government (Lungisa and Nzewi, 2023). According to Enwereji and Uwizeyimana (2019), strategic management processes, part of the core elements of NPM, play a significant role in streamlining the resource allocation process and, consequently, improving service delivery outcomes. Similarly, Pilusa and Shipalana (2020) also emphasize innovative management practices that enhance efficiency and transparency in municipal operations. In applying the principles of NPM, this study discusses how municipalities can use performance evaluation mechanisms, technology-driven solutions, and citizen-centered approaches to address governance inefficiencies and fulfill their service delivery mandates.

Furthermore, Kroukamp and Cloete (2018) have pointed out that professionalism and performance management are tools for enhancing accountability, thus responding to the calls of NPM for measurable outcomes. Kariuki and Tshandu (2014) provide evidence on how service delivery frameworks informed by NPM principles can empower citizens and ensure better governance outcomes. From this theoretical perspective, the study investigates how result-oriented and innovative strategies, audits, and public-private partnerships can transform governance practices and foster sustainable service delivery in South African municipalities.

The theoretical insights from this study add to the greater context of public administration through a practical framework through which improvements in local government operations can be achieved. By applying NPM, this study offers new insights into the interaction of accountability, efficiency, and innovation in service delivery. The framework addresses systemic governance failures and indicates pathways to implement performance-driven and citizen-focused reforms. These insights affect policymakers, municipal managers, and governance scholars in advancing service delivery excellence.

2.2 Literature review

2.2.1 The impact of lacking consequence management on service delivery in local government

The current research evidence on local government in South Africa suggests that poor consequence management is among the most predominant contributors to service delivery failure. Inadequate enforcement of accountability mechanisms encourages inefficiency, corruption, and mismanagement, making municipalities unable to respond to community needs. Studies underscore that weak oversight, combined with political

interference, erodes municipal governance, ultimately impairing public service delivery (Oupa, 2023; Chili et al., 2023; Mamokhere, 2023; Ngumbela, 2022; Emily and Muyengwa, 2021). This systemic issue is exacerbated by the failure to implement corrective actions against non-compliance, allowing underperformance to persist unchecked.

For instance, Oupa (2023) identifies that poor performance management systems have contributed to a continuous backlog in service delivery in Greater Tzaneen Municipality. In the same vein, Mamokhere (2023) argues that structural and governance impediments often prevent accountability from being enforced in local government. Ngumbela (2022) identifies policy mismatch as one of the most alarming causes that disrupt municipal operations. However, Chili et al. (2023) pointed out that sound governance systems are usually crafted to fail without accountability. From these insights, inadequate consequence management has facilitated enabling administrative inefficiencies and impeded service delivery outcomes (Mazele and Amoah, 2022; Thabang et al., 2023). Mamokhere's (2023) emphasis on governance barriers is well-founded and complements. Oupa's (2023) findings on the role of weak performance systems. Ngumbela's (2022) observations ascertain that, addressing policy misalignment could improve service delivery outcomes. Chili et al.'s (2023) conclusions further reinforce the need for stringent accountability frameworks.

Political interference is a significant driver of governance failures in local municipalities. Studies reveal that politicization often prioritizes factional interests over public service delivery, undermining administrative efficiency. Political meddling creates an environment where corruption thrives, further deteriorating governance (Masiya et al., 2021; Chili et al., 2023; Emily and Muyengwa, 2021). Research also suggests that the overlap between political and administrative roles often results in ineffective decision-making and delayed implementation of key projects (Mazele and Amoah, 2022; Ngumbela, 2022). The blending of political leadership and operational management exacerbates inefficiency in service delivery.

Emily and Muyengwa (2021) illustrate that political interference in maintaining infrastructure in Limpopo Province has contributed to misallocating and ignoring resources. Masiya et al. (2021) further emphasize that political patronage networks shield underperforming officials from accountability and perpetuate poor service delivery. Thabang et al. (2023) indicate that political delays strain timely execution in municipalities, while Mazele and Amoah (2022) propose depoliticized municipal management. These results highlight the destructive impact of political interference on municipal governance and service delivery.

Masiya et al. (2021) views on political patronage complement Emily and Muyengwa's (2021) resource misallocation. Thabang et al. (2023) recommend a minimalist political interference situation, which could spur huge improvements in municipal performance. The professional administrative framework prescribed by Mazele and Amoah (2022) offers a plausible solution to those problems.

Corruption further compounds governance failures in South African municipalities. Research shows that corrupt practices, ranging from procurement fraud to nepotism, drain resources and diminish the municipal capacity to deliver essential services (Mamokhere, 2023; Emily and Muyengwa, 2021; Chili et al., 2023).

The absence of effective oversight mechanisms ensures that such practices continue unabated, eroding public trust and further deteriorating service delivery outcomes (Ngumbela, 2022; Oupa, 2023; Thabang et al., 2023).

For example, Mamokhere (2023) relates corruption to general governance failures at the municipal level, while Chili et al. (2023) emphasize that generally weak accountability systems have sustained corruption activities. Ngumbela (2022) identifies loopholes within policies that present opportunities for mismanagement, while Oupa (2023) mentions that financial mismanagement exacerbates service delivery challenges. Evidence by Thabang et al. (2023) demonstrates that the requirement for strong anti-corruption strategies and heightened audit processes addresses these issues. Such studies further reiterate the essence of oversight in ensuring better municipal governance. Findings by Mamokhere (2023) tally with systemic governance weaknesses (Chili et al., 2023). Ngumbela (2022) insisted on policy reforms that go to the root of corruption. The insights by Oupa (2023) into financial mismanagement, if applied, would see municipalities improving service delivery.

The lack of consequence management is one of the core factors driving service delivery failures in South African municipalities. Governance inefficiencies, political interference, and corruption are highly intertwined processes that undermine municipal performance. These challenges call for accountability frameworks, depoliticizing municipal governance, and strengthening oversight mechanisms. Such reforms are key to restoring public trust and improving service delivery outcomes.

2.2.2 Strategies for enhancing accountability and service delivery in municipal governance

Evidence from literature points out different ways to improve accountability and service delivery in municipalities in South Africa. Studies emphasize that the instillation of professional governance, innovative practice integration, and adoption of strategic frameworks can help resolve persistent problems in service delivery. Many scholars have pointed out that performance management tools and cooperative governance are essential in enhancing municipal efficiency and responsiveness (Schoeman and Chakwizira, 2023; Thabang et al., 2023; Kamara, 2021). While some strategies to enforce such policies are proposed, the implementation process is normally inhibited by institutional and political challenges that should be systematically resolved.

On the one hand, Schoeman and Chakwizira (2023) design a performance management tool that should be applied in South African municipalities to contribute toward efficiency and accountability. Thabang et al. (2023) emphasize that delay in service delivery is alleviated by solidifying the processes of municipalities, hence adhering to governance principles. Kamara (2021) emphasizes the need for cooperative governance and accountability frameworks as essential ingredients in addressing local economic development challenges. Research also confirms that strategic management practices can improve service delivery, especially in a complicated governance environment (Ngcobo and Mdani, 2015; Enwereji and Uwizeyimana, 2019). The findings illustrate the integrated and innovative approaches required for improving municipal governance.

These studies by Schoeman and Chakwizira (2023) and Thabang et al. (2023) lay a good foundation for addressing inefficiencies. Kamara's (2021) emphasis on cooperative governance converges with the broader argument for accountability as a cornerstone of improved service delivery. If implemented, the recommendation on strategic management by Ngcobo and Mdani (2015) could see a significant turn in the performance of municipalities.

Digital innovations also emerge as key to accelerating service delivery. Research indicates that technology can bridge operational gaps and foster transparency in municipal processes. Shava and Vyas-Doorgapersad (2022) argue that integrating digital tools, such as e-governance platforms, can improve responsiveness and citizen engagement. Pilusa and Shipalana (2020) echo this sentiment, emphasizing the potential of innovative management to transform service delivery models. Mbecke (2015) advocates for municipal entrepreneurship as an alternative strategy, leveraging innovation to sustain governance outcomes. Evidence shows municipalities adopting digital and entrepreneurial approaches are better placed to meet community needs. As indicated by Mamokhere et al. (2021) and Kariuki and Tshandu (2014), these approaches reveal the transformative role of technology and innovation in local governance. Shava and Vyas-Doorgapersad (2022) present digital innovations that are quite relevant to the resource-constrained municipalities of South Africa. The entrepreneurial approaches that Mbecke (2015) has suggested are another way to examine service delivery challenges. If the recommendations of Pilusa and Shipalana (2020) are taken up, municipalities could use technology to improve governance outcomes.

Professionalism and adherence to the principles of governance form the very basis of better service delivery. Studies have identified that training and capacity-building programs can enhance the capacity of municipal officials to better address governance challenges (Kroukamp and Cloete, 2018; Mamokhere et al., 2021; Nene, 2016). In addition, accountability may be encouraged through performance appraisal systems and rewards linked to the implementation of standards of governance (Kroukamp, 2001, 2014). According to Nene (2016) the dual governance frameworks, balancing the centralized and decentralized systems, could provide better service delivery in municipalities. The improvements would only be sustained when the practice of governance was aligned with the principles of the Constitution. Mamokhere et al. (2021) and Enwereji and Uwizeyimana (2019) support the importance of professionalism and structured governance in achieving service delivery excellence.

3 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how the lack of consequence management in South African local government has contributed to service delivery deficiencies in 10 selected municipalities. The qualitative approach was chosen to capture the nuanced perspectives of municipal officials, community leaders, and stakeholders regarding governance challenges and the implications of administrative deficiencies. This design aligns with the study's aim to demystify the assertion "Spare the Rod and Spoil the Child" by examining systemic failures in

municipal governance and identifying strategies for implementing consequence management.

3.1 Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to select 50 participants from 10 municipalities, ensuring that individuals with direct knowledge of governance practices and service delivery challenges were included. This method prioritized the inclusion of participants with relevant expertise and lived experiences, such as municipal managers, councilors, and community representatives. Purposive sampling aligns with Etikan's et al. (2016) recommendation for targeting key informants in qualitative studies. By focusing on individuals who interact with governance structures, the study captured diverse insights into local government deficiencies and opportunities for reform.

Focus group discussions were conducted with four to six participants per session, aligning with Herron et al. (2023) recommendation for manageable group sizes to encourage dynamic and inclusive participation. This approach ensured diverse perspectives and robust data collection (see Table 1).

3.2 Data collection and data analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. These methods were selected to encourage open dialogue and in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. An interview guide was designed to cover key topics, including compliance with legislation, leadership practices, and barriers to implementing consequence management. Focus group discussions, comprising five to six participants per session, allowed for dynamic interaction and the cross-pollination of ideas. These sessions were conducted via Microsoft Teams, enabling participation from geographically dispersed municipalities and ensuring accessibility for all respondents.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Research Ethics Committee. Permissions were also secured from the participating municipalities, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. To maintain confidentiality, all data were anonymised, and participants were assured that their identities would not be disclosed in the reporting of findings.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2022) framework. This method identified recurring patterns and themes within the data, providing a structured approach to understanding the governance challenges and deficiencies highlighted by participants. Key themes included unreformed local government institutions, political interference, lack of compliance with legislation, and weak leadership practices. Coding was conducted manually to ensure a deep engagement with the data, and findings were validated through peer debriefing to enhance credibility.

Trustworthiness was established by adhering to credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Stahl, 2020). An audit trail documented all analysis decisions, ensuring transparency in the research process. This rigorous approach ensured that

TABLE 1 Focus group participants (total: 50).

Municipality	Code	Number of participants	Position at work	Demographic characteristics/background information
Emfuleni Municipality	EM	5	Municipal Managers, Community Leaders	Diverse ethnic backgrounds, varying years of experience in local government.
Ehlanzeni Municipality	EH	5	Municipal Managers, Stakeholders	Mix of genders, with experience in public administration and community engagement.
Tshwane Municipality	TS	5	Municipal Managers, Community Leaders	Predominantly male, with professional expertise ranging from infrastructure to finance.
Bushbuckridge Municipality	BB	6	Municipal Managers, Stakeholders	Mixed age and seniority ranges, including senior managers and young professionals.
Msunduzi Municipality	MS	5	Municipal Managers, Community Leaders	Mixed gender and diverse professional backgrounds, including education and health services.
Okahlamba Municipality	OK	6	Municipal Managers, Stakeholders	Predominantly female, with extensive experience in municipal governance and project management.
City of Johannesburg	CJ	5	Municipal Managers, Community Leaders	Ethnically diverse, broad range of roles, including urban planning and environmental management.
Mbombela Local Municipality	ML	5	Municipal Managers, Stakeholders	Gender balanced, with expertise in economic development and public safety.
Combined Municipalities Group 1	CM1	4	Community Leaders, Stakeholders	Participants from mixed municipalities, varied professional and demographic backgrounds.
Combined Municipalities Group 2	CM2	4	Community Leaders, Stakeholders	Participants from mixed municipalities, with extensive experience in civic engagement and policy development.

Source: Authors (2025).

the findings accurately reflected participants' experiences and provided a robust foundation for exploring strategies to implement consequence management in local government.

Participants in the study were systematically coded to maintain anonymity while ensuring clarity and traceability in the analysis. Each participant was assigned a unique identifier based on their municipality, role, and sequence. Municipal managers were coded with the prefix MM, followed by the municipality code and a numerical sequence (e.g., MM-EM1 for the first municipal manager from Emfuleni Municipality).

4 Findings

The following section outlines the key themes derived from the study that signal the systemic issues in local government transformation for the selected municipalities: unreformed institutions of local government, the culture of comradeship, lack of political and administrative will, weak intergovernmental relations, and lack of visionary leadership. Such findings offer insights into barriers to effective governance and service delivery.

4.1 Unreformed local government institutions

Unreformed local government institutions are those municipal systems and structures that resist being transformed and changed, with continuous adherence to old practices that are unsuitable for the demands of modern governance. They tend to be characterized by persistent bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of responsiveness, and weak mechanisms for accountability. In the South African context, unreformed institutions perpetuate failures in governance, poor delivery of services, and dissatisfaction among communities. This theme strongly emerged in this study, where participants described systemic inertia, resistance to transformation, and lack of consequence management, all of which hinder local government from performing its developmental mandate.

Participants from different municipalities highlighted the deep-seated issues plaguing local government institutions. A recurring sentiment was that institutional rigidity and unwillingness to reform perpetuated inefficiencies and poor governance outcomes.

Participant 1 (MM-EM1) from Emfuleni Municipality emphasized how outdated processes stifle innovation and responsiveness:

> We are working with systems designed decades ago. These structures were built for a different era, and they don't align with the realities of today's communities. When you suggest change, the system fights back—it's resistant to anything new. (Participant 1 (MM-EM1)

This observation illustrates the systemic nature of the problem, where institutional frameworks are ill-suited to address contemporary challenges, resulting in stagnation and inefficiency.

Participant 2 (CL-EH2) from Ehlanzeni Municipality focused on the lack of adaptation to new governance practices.

> *Our municipality struggles to implement modern governance frameworks because people in power don't see the need to change. They are comfortable with how things are, even if it's failing the community.*

This comment underscores the reluctance of leadership to embrace reform, which is often driven by a fear of disrupting entrenched power structures.

Participant 3 (SH-MS3) from Msunduzi Municipality highlighted the absence of accountability in perpetuating unresponsiveness:

> *There are no consequences for failure. People make mistakes, ignore their responsibilities, and nothing happens. This sends a message that you can keep doing things the old way without any repercussions.*

This insight points to the systemic lack of consequence management as a barrier to institutional reform and improved governance practices.

Participant 4 (MM-CJ4) from the City of Johannesburg elaborated on how unresponsive institutions affect service delivery:

> *Service delivery is directly impacted when systems are not designed to adapt. For instance, we have procurement procedures that delay projects unnecessarily because they are outdated and rigid.*

This response demonstrates the practical implications of unreformed institutions on municipal performance and service delivery.

Participant 5 (CL-BB5) from Bushbuckridge Municipality discussed the resistance to reform among municipal officials:

> *People are used to the way things have always been done. Suggesting reforms often leads to hostility because they feel threatened by change—it's like you're taking away their comfort zone.*

This perspective highlights how personal and institutional resistance to change hinders the implementation of necessary reforms.

The unreformed state of local government institutions is a systemic challenge facing the municipalities. Participant responses reveal that entrenched practices, lack of accountability, and resistance to change combine to perpetuate inefficiency and poor governance outcomes. These responses strengthen the argument that service delivery deficiencies stem from or are compounded by the absence of consequence management and reluctance toward reform. These issues require a commitment to institutional transformation at the level of systems modernization, adaptive leadership, and robust accountability mechanisms. Municipalities would transition from stagnation to responsiveness, meeting their developmental mandate and improving service delivery outcomes.

4.2 Comradeship (sparing transgressors)

The study's findings revealed that common challenges were experienced across these institutions when transforming local government in the selected municipalities. The reluctance to bring municipal officials to book for financial mismanagement, poor implementation of work procedures, resistance to change, poor compliance with legislation on municipal governance and unethical conduct were noted to be affecting local government transformation. Further absence of consequent management was reported in local government procurement systems where supply chain processes were manipulated, although local government leadership was not held accountable.

Participant 1 (MM-BB1) from Bushbuckridge Municipality described how political loyalty overrides professional accountability.

> *When someone in a leadership position makes a mistake, they are rarely reprimanded. Instead, they are protected because they belong to a certain political faction. This makes it difficult to enforce discipline or hold anyone accountable.*

This perspective illustrates how political affiliations obstruct governance processes and weaken organizational integrity.

Participant 2 (CL-EH2) from Ehlanzeni Municipality focused on the redeployment of officials involved in misconduct:

> *If a manager or official is found to have misused funds, they are not removed—they are simply moved to another position or municipality. It's like a reward system for failure.*

This response emphasizes the lack of consequence management and the systemic recycling of underperforming officials, which perpetuates inefficiencies across local government institutions.

Participant 3 (SH-CJ3) from the City of Johannesburg elaborated on the implications for service delivery:

> *When people know they won't be held accountable, they don't take their work seriously. This affects how projects are managed and ultimately delays or compromises service delivery.*

This participant highlighted the direct link between the culture of sparing transgressors and the operational inefficiencies that impact communities.

Participant 4 (MM-EM4) from Emfuleni Municipality noted how supply chain processes are manipulated to favor allies:

> *Procurement processes are a key area where this culture is evident. Tenders are awarded not based on merit but on who you know or who you are connected to politically.*

This statement underscores the role of comradeship in fostering corruption and undermining fair procurement practices, which are critical to effective governance.

Participant 5 (CL-MS5) from Msunduzi Municipality pointed out how comradeship demoralizes dedicated officials:

> *Those who try to work ethically often feel sidelined because they are not part of the inner circle. This culture discourages good governance and pushes capable people out of the system.*

This observation highlights how the pervasive culture of comradeship erodes morale and marginalizes individuals committed to ethical practices and professional excellence.

The findings show that comradeship, characterized by the protection of transgressors, is an endemic problem in local government institutions. In this culture, political loyalty and personal relations are valued more than accountability; therefore, it is a culture of impunity. Respondents consistently associated this practice with systemic inefficiency, corruption, and poor service delivery. The response to this challenge requires solid reforms in breaking protectionist networks, strict accountability measures, and instilling an ethical leadership culture. In the absence of these measures, comradeship-ascribed governance failures will continue to hinder the transformation of local government institutions and the delivery of essential services.

4.3 Lack of political and administrative will

The lack of political and administrative will refers to the reluctance or failure of political leaders and municipal officials to enforce governance reforms, address systemic inefficiencies, and prioritize service delivery. This theme emerged strongly in this study, as participants pointed out how self-interest, fear of disrupting entrenched power structures, and short-term political agendas hinder transformative efforts. Without political and administrative will, reforms for accountability, service delivery, and improvement in institutional performance remain superficial and ineffective.

Participant 1 (MM-TS1) from Tshwane Municipality emphasized the reluctance of leaders to take decisive action against governance failures:

> *Leadership in this municipality is often hesitant to make bold decisions that might upset their political allies or expose internal weaknesses. As a result, critical issues are ignored.*

This response reflects the paralysis caused by leaders prioritizing political convenience over effective governance.

Participant 2 (SH-BB2) from Bushbuckridge Municipality discussed the tendency to focus on short-term political gains:

> *Decisions are often made based on what will secure votes in the next election, not what will benefit the community in the long run. This short-sightedness prevents meaningful progress.*

This perspective illustrates how electoral considerations often override developmental priorities, undermining long-term governance goals.

Participant 3 (CL-CJ3) from the City of Johannesburg linked the lack of administrative will to ineffective implementation of policies:

> *Policies are there, but there is no will enforce them. Officials are more focused on avoiding controversy than doing what's right for the community.*

This insight highlights the disconnect between policy formulation and implementation, which is exacerbated by administrative inertia.

Participant 4 (MM-EM4) from Emfuleni Municipality elaborated on the fear of confronting entrenched corruption:

> *Corruption is an open secret, but no one wants to address it because it's politically risky. People in power are afraid of stepping on toes.*

This response underscores how the lack of political courage perpetuates corruption and weakens governance structures.

Participant 5 (CL-MS5) from Msunduzi Municipality noted how resistance to collaboration further exacerbates the issue:

> *There's no willingness to work together across departments or with other levels of government. Everyone is working in silos, and this makes it impossible to address systemic challenges.*

This statement reflects the fragmentation and lack of coordinated effort impeding governance and service delivery.

The lack of political and administrative will emerged as a significant barrier to transforming local government institutions in South Africa. Some identified challenges are the reluctance to enforce accountability, short-termism, fear of confronting entrenched corruption, and siloed approaches. This theme thus highlights the importance of fostering leadership prioritizing transparency, long-term developmental goals, and collaborative governance. Without a committed political and administrative will, efforts to reform local government and improve service delivery are unlikely to succeed, perpetuating the systemic failures this study seeks to address.

4.4 Hesitancy to implement change management

Resistance to change management means local government institutions and their leadership are hesitant to implement strategies that facilitate organizational transformation and operational efficiency. Change management refers to the structured process for moving individuals, teams, and organizations from a current state to a desired state. In the light of local government in South Africa, there has been persistence of inefficiencies, resistance to reform, and a culture of complacency because of a lack of effective change management. It is brought about by the fear of the disruption of established systems, resistance to accountability, and incapacity to deliver transformational results.

Participant 1 (MM-BB1) from Bushbuckridge Municipality highlighted the fear of disrupting the status quo.

> *There's a general resistance to change because people are comfortable with how things have always been done. Introducing new ways of doing things threatens their comfort zones, and they fight against it.*

This insight reflects the inertia within municipal systems, where the fear of change fosters resistance and blocks progress.

Participant 2 (CL-EH2) from Ehlanzeni Municipality explained how a lack of understanding about change management contributes to hesitancy.

> *Change management is not a priority because leaders don't understand its importance. They think it's unnecessary or too expensive, so they avoid it altogether.*

This response highlights the absence of awareness and prioritization of change management practices, which hinders organizational growth and reform.

Participant 3 (MM-MS3) from Msunduzi Municipality pointed out the role of leadership deficiencies in driving resistance.

> *Leadership is a big part of the problem. Without strong leaders who believe in transformation, the institution remains stuck in old ways. No one is willing to take the lead on change.*

This perspective underscores the critical role of leadership in fostering an environment conducive to change and innovation.

Participant 4 (SH-CJ4) from the City of Johannesburg elaborated on the fear of accountability that often accompanies change management.

> *Change management requires transparency and accountability, which some officials fear because it exposes inefficiencies or mismanagement. They see change as a threat rather than an opportunity.*

This statement links hesitancy to implement change management to a broader culture of avoiding scrutiny and accountability in local government.

Participant 5 (CL-OK5) from Okahlamba Municipality discussed the practical challenges of implementing change management.

> *Even when there's a willingness to embrace change, there's a lack of resources and skills to execute it effectively. Without training and support, change efforts fail before they even begin.*

This response highlights the logistical and capacity-related barriers that prevent the effective implementation of change management initiatives.

The findings indicate reluctance or resistance to implementing change management is a key inhibitor of transformation in South African local government. Respondents consistently attributed this resistance to accountability avoidance, fear of disturbing entrenched systems, leadership deficiencies, and lack of capacity. This is detrimental to the modernization of municipal operations

and improvement in service delivery. This calls for an enabling culture of change readiness through leadership training, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement. Municipalities will leap from inefficiency to responsiveness by overcoming hesitancy, embracing structured change management practices, meeting their developmental mandates, and addressing systemic failures highlighted in this study.

The following section analyses findings on the possible strategies to enhance accountability and improve service delivery in local government.

4.5 Strengthening performance management systems

Strengthening the performance management system involves creating and implementing structured frameworks that monitor, evaluate, and improve the effectiveness of municipal operations and service delivery. Within the South African local government context, these systems ensure accountability, with employees and leaders responsible for their roles and deliverables. The performance management system harmonizes institutional goals with quantifiable results, through which transparency and accountability become part of the everyday culture of continuous improvement.

Participant 1 (MM-EM1) from Emfuleni Municipality discussed the importance of setting clear performance targets:

> *Without defined goals and measures, it's impossible to hold people accountable. Everyone needs to know what's expected and how their performance will be evaluated.*

This perspective highlights the need for clear and measurable performance indicators for accountability and operational efficiency.

Participant 2 (CL-MS2) from Msunduzi Municipality emphasized the role of regular evaluations in maintaining accountability:

> *When there are no regular assessments, it becomes easy for officials to underperform. Evaluations should be tied to both rewards and consequences to motivate improvement.*

This response underscores the importance of linking performance reviews with tangible outcomes, such as rewards for excellence and penalties for non-compliance.

Participant 3 (SH-CJ3) from the City of Johannesburg elaborated on the integration of technology in performance management:

> *Digital tools can track progress and flag issues in real-time. They make it easier to see where things are going wrong and to intervene before problems escalate.*

This insight points to the transformative potential of digital innovations in enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of performance monitoring systems.

Participant 4 (MM-BB4) from Bushbuckridge Municipality noted the challenges of implementing performance systems:

> *Many municipalities lack the skills and resources to implement robust systems. Training and support are critical to ensure these systems are used effectively.*

This response highlights the capacity constraints that need to be addressed to optimize performance management frameworks.

Participant 5 (CL-EH5) from Ehlanzeni Municipality suggested involving the community in performance evaluations:

> *Residents should be part of the evaluation process because they experience the services firsthand. Their feedback is critical for measuring success.*

This perspective underscores the importance of participatory accountability, where communities actively assess municipal performance.

4.6 Enhancing leadership development and training

Enhancing leadership development and training involves equipping municipal leaders with the skills, knowledge, and ethical grounding needed to navigate complex governance challenges and drive effective service delivery. Strong leadership is essential for fostering accountability, inspiring teams, and implementing transformative strategies. In the context of South African local government, leadership development is crucial for overcoming systemic inefficiencies, addressing corruption, and prioritizing community needs.

Participant 1 (MM-CJ1) from the City of Johannesburg highlighted the importance of ethical leadership:

> *Leadership is about setting an example. If leaders are not ethical and transparent, they cannot expect their teams to behave differently.*

This response underscores the role of ethical conduct in cultivating a culture of accountability and integrity within municipalities.

Participant 2 (CL-OK2) from Okahlamba Municipality emphasized the need for adaptive leadership training:

> *Municipal leaders must be trained to adapt to changing circumstances, especially in crises. Without flexibility and foresight, they can't respond effectively to challenges.*

This insight highlights the need for leaders to develop skills that enable them to manage uncertainty and drive innovation in service delivery.

Participant 3 (MM-MS3) from Msunduzi Municipality discussed the lack of continuous professional development:

> *Once leaders are appointed, there's no follow-up training. Leadership is an ongoing process, and they need regular development to stay effective.*

This comment points to the gap in continuous professional development for municipal leaders, which limits their capacity to implement reforms and address governance challenges.

Participant 4 (SH-BB4) from Bushbuckridge Municipality suggested peer learning and mentorship programs:

> *Learning from experienced leaders and sharing best practices can be very effective. Municipalities should encourage mentorship and collaboration among leaders.*

This perspective highlights the value of knowledge-sharing and mentorship as tools for leadership development.

Participant 5 (CL-EM5) from Emfuleni Municipality noted the role of servant leadership in prioritizing community needs:

> *Leaders should focus on serving the community, not themselves. Training should instill a sense of duty and accountability to the people they serve.*

This response reflects the importance of servant leadership in aligning municipal priorities with the needs and expectations of local communities.

Strengthening leadership development and training is a core strategy in accountability and service delivery at the local government level. Participants' responses show a need for ethical grounding, adaptive training, continuous development, peer mentorship, and a focus on servant leadership. In investing in leadership capacity, municipalities can redress systemic governance failures and build resilient institutions that can deliver sustainable, effective services to their communities.

5 Discussion

This study argued that the absence of consequence management has entrenched systemic failures in South African local government. The findings highlight five critical challenges that undermine governance: unreformed institutions, the culture of comradeship, lack of political and administrative will, resistance to change management, and weak performance management systems. These findings demonstrate how sparing the "rod" of consequence management has spoiled local governance and contributed to service delivery failures. These findings are discussed below, referencing supporting and contrasting literature to emphasize the study's central argument.

The findings show that municipal institutions are stagnant, with entrenched practices that resist modernization and adaptation to contemporary governance demands. Participants emphasized outdated governance structures and weak accountability mechanisms as significant obstacles to effective service delivery. These findings underscore the study's argument that institutional inertia stems from a failure to implement meaningful consequence

management. Fourie and Malan (2023) similarly argue that institutional rigidity in municipalities perpetuates inefficiency and mismanagement. Mamokhere (2023) highlights how municipalities' inability to reform limits their responsiveness to community needs. In contrast, Kariuki and Tshandu (2014) demonstrate that municipalities embracing decentralized, citizen-centered governance achieve better service delivery outcomes. These contrasting insights reinforce the need for structural reforms in South African municipalities, emphasizing consequence management to dismantle rigid systems and build accountability.

The study found that the culture of political loyalty, or "comradeship," undermines accountability in local government. Politically connected individuals are often protected from consequence management, enabling corruption and inefficiency to thrive. This finding is central to the argument that sparing the "rod" has fostered a culture of impunity, weakening governance systems. Rulashe and Ijeoma (2022) support this view, noting that political patronage prioritizes factional interests over public service delivery. Emily and Muyengwa (2021) also found that political interference disrupts resource allocation and delays project implementation. However, when enforced, Kamara (2021) highlights that cooperative governance frameworks can mitigate political interference and strengthen accountability. These findings suggest that breaking protectionist networks requires strict enforcement of consequence management frameworks, alongside efforts to promote ethical leadership and professional integrity in municipal governance.

The study found a significant lack of political and administrative will to enforce accountability in municipalities. Leaders often prioritize short-term political goals, fearing the disruption of entrenched power structures. This aligns with the study's argument that the reluctance to wield the "rod" of accountability has allowed systemic inefficiencies to persist. Mamokhere (2023) highlights similar issues, noting that governance reforms often fail due to a lack of political commitment. Conversely, Schoeman and Chakwizira (2023) argue that strong political leadership can drive meaningful reform when aligned with performance-based management practices. Their study provides examples of municipalities where committed leadership has improved service delivery outcomes. This contrast underscores the importance of fostering political and administrative leadership that prioritizes consequence management as a tool for reform and long-term community development.

Resistance to change emerged as a critical barrier to governance reform. Participants cited fear of accountability and reluctance to disrupt entrenched systems as reasons for this resistance. This finding supports the study's argument that municipalities resist reforms that enforce consequence management and disrupt entrenched inefficiencies. Schoeman and Chakwizira (2023) similarly identify resistance to reform as a significant obstacle to operational efficiency in local government. Pilusa and Shipalana (2020) emphasize that municipalities investing in leadership training and capacity-building initiatives often overcome resistance and foster a change culture. These findings suggest that addressing resistance requires targeted programs to empower municipal officials with the skills and resources needed for transformation. Leadership development should also foster a readiness for change and a commitment to accountability.

The absence of effective performance management systems was another key finding of this study. Participants highlighted the lack of clear performance targets, regular evaluations, and digital monitoring tools as barriers to accountability. These findings reinforce the study's argument that the failure to enforce performance management reflects a broader lack of consequence management in local government. Kamara (2021) and Enwereji and Uwizeyimana (2019) stress the importance of performance-based governance frameworks in improving accountability and service delivery. However, Kariuki and Tshandu (2014) caution that performance management systems often fail when political interference and resource constraints are not addressed. This suggests that while performance systems are critical, they must be supported by broader governance reforms. Municipalities must invest in technology-driven performance monitoring tools and foster participatory governance to strengthen accountability frameworks.

The study acknowledges that poor transparency, ethical leadership and good governance lie at the heart of municipal dysfunction and poor service delivery in South Africa. The research indicates a lack of transparency, which enables maladministration to go unnoticed, and political patronage inhibits ethical leadership. The study underscores the importance of institutionalizing transparency through public reporting of procurement decisions, real-time audit trails and electronic monitoring systems to support the argument. Furthermore, promoting ethical leadership entails training programs to instill responsibility, professionalism, and integrity in local government officials. All these should be incorporated within a broader governance reform program that enforces the provisions of the Constitution, deters impunity, and restores public trust. Thus, this research not only identifies the lacunas in such pillars of governance but also develops pragmatic methods to mainstream ethical leadership, good governance, and transparency in urban operations.

5.1 Implications for theory and practice

The findings of this study contribute significantly to theoretical discussions on governance and accountability, particularly within the framework of New Public Management. Identifying systemic barriers to accountability and service delivery provides empirical evidence that reinforces the relevance of NPM principles in addressing inefficiencies in local government. The findings align with the theoretical proposition that performance-based management systems, ethical leadership, and consequence management are crucial to organizational change. This study also furthers existing theoretical positions by demonstrating how cultural variables, such as comradeship and resistance to change, interplay with institutional inefficiencies to thwart governance reform. These insights enrich the application of NPM in contexts where entrenched political and social practices challenge the implementation of standard governance models.

The findings reveal a high urgency for municipalities to use strong performance management systems to monitor and evaluate service delivery outputs. In this respect, local authorities must increase digital integration to bring transparency and accountability. In addition, leadership development programs

should focus on ethical and servant leadership, which puts community needs above political interests. It is recommended that policymakers impose consequence management frameworks that break the culture of impunity and reward compliance with governance standards.

In addition, responding to resistance to change will necessitate targeted capacity-building programs for municipal officials to acquire the competencies and knowledge necessary for implementing reforms. Community participation must also be institutionalized to allow residents to assess municipal performance and hold their leaders accountable. These pragmatic steps respond to the governance challenges identified in this study and provide actionable pathways for improving service delivery and rebuilding public trust in local government institutions.

5.2 Limitations and future research

The empirical evidence relies on qualitative data from chosen municipalities in South Africa. The variation in the governance challenges might not be fully expressed. Longitudinal studies or a mixed-method approach could be ways to pursue how consequence management evolves in time and impacts governance outcomes in the future. This could also expand the geographical scope of the study, thus enabling an understanding of regional variations in governance practices. Future research should also examine the relationship between political dynamics and institutional reform in local government. These findings should be integrated into strategic interventions by policymakers on how to strengthen performance management systems, ensure community participation, and enforce consequence management. The insights collectively form a foundation for transforming local government into an open, accountable, and effective system that meets the needs of the South African communities.

6 Conclusion

The study sought to examine how the lack of consequence management has led to inefficiencies in service delivery in South African municipalities and to recommend ways to enhance accountability in local government. The essay has argued that institutional governance defects, including untransformed institutions, protection of offenders by comradeship, and resistance to change management, perpetuate inefficiencies and undermine service delivery. The study has demonstrated that the breakdown of robust consequence management systems and leadership reform has guaranteed that the breakdowns have persisted and caused mistrust among the local governments and the respective communities.

The findings imply that consequence management is essential in overcoming bureaucratic shortcomings and repositioning local government leadership. Internal legal and institutional checks must be strengthened if municipalities are to become good service providers. This involves giving high-priority audit recommendations by the Auditor-General and encouraging social accountability. Another important strategy the study found was taking advantage of citizen and stakeholder participation in

governance processes to revolutionize public service delivery and re-establish public confidence.

To seal the current gaps in policy and improve performance management, the research proposes four targeted recommendations: (1) amend the Municipal Systems Act to prevent politically driven cadre deployment and protect ethical officials against political retaliation; (2) adopt and apply electronic performance management systems allowing for real-time tracking of service delivery outcomes and accountability measures; (3) vest Municipal Public Accounts Committees (MPACs) with investigatory powers, autonomous budgets, and enforcement powers; and (4) require all municipalities to submit annual consequence management implementation plans to the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA), subject to measurable performance targets and conditional release of funds. These reforms are central to holding institutions accountable and rendering municipalities credible, community-oriented service providers.

They bring new insights to the interplay between governance practice and service delivery outcomes in South Africa. They contribute to the public administration discipline by highlighting the centrality of institutional reform, ethical leadership, and participatory governance. Although imperfect, with areas of weakness like a focus on certain municipalities, the research presents valuable lessons that can be taken and used to address the systemic challenges facing local governments. The relatively limited participant universe suggests that additional research could explore how these dynamics are experienced in a larger number of municipalities over an extended time period. This study recommends policy reforms to fix poor consequence management and political interference in municipalities. These are to legislate to limit cadre deployment, impose digital performance systems to promote transparency, and give MPACS some enforcement powers. Municipalities must also submit annual consequence management plans to COGTA that are tied to funding objectives. These interventions have the goal of promoting accountability and improving service delivery.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by University of Kwazulu-Natal Research Committee. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

ES: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. TM: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration,

Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. OO: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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