



Service Charges and Implications on Service Delivery at the Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality, South Africa

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to assess the impact and the effect of non-payment of municipal services on service delivery in the Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality, Limpopo Province in South Africa. Municipalities, given their proximity with the constituents, are responsible for delivering basic services such as water, electricity, road maintenance, refuse collection and sanitation amongst others to communities under their jurisdiction. Various pieces of legislation permit municipalities to charge for services rendered to communities particularly water and electricity. The paper adopted both qualitative and quantitative research approaches for data collection and analysis. Households in the selected villages (Motetema, Tambo and Groblersdal) within the Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality were randomly selected to participate in the study together with the officials of the Municipality. Non-payment for municipal services is a great challenge in the South African local government and threatens the financial viability and sustainable service delivery. This paper probes the nature of non-payment of municipal services, its impact on service delivery and the methods used to tackle non-payments in order to make recommendations. The findings reveal that indeed revenue collection and non-payment of municipal service charges is a challenge in Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality and therefore has dire impact on effective service delivery. This is due to unwillingness to pay for service charges, unemployment, poor quality services, low income amongst other challenges. Thus, the municipality is unable to generate adequate revenue to deliver better services.

Keywords: Revenue, Revenue Collection, Non-Payment, Service Delivery, Local Government

INTRODUCTION

Revenue collection by municipalities and non-payment for services by residents is a huge challenge worldwide especially in previously colonised countries such as Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Rwanda, Algeria, Benin, and South Africa. According to Corrigan (2009:5), Africa is dominated by countries which experience socio-economic challenges such as high unemployment rate, poverty and inequality amongst others and South Africa is one of those countries with such misfortunes. South Africa is experiencing high population growth, high teenage pregnancy, and xenophobic attacks because of speculations that foreigners are taking the jobs for natives (Wilkinson, 2015). The more people are poor, the more the demand for provision



of basic services in local government (Mathebula, 2014). This then means that a challenge is presented to municipalities in their capacity to meet the demands of the citizens (Curristine, Lonti & Joumard, 2007).

In terms of Section 152 (1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), municipalities must provide basic services to communities within their territories and be able to generate income and collect revenue for the provided services (Chauke, Sebola & Mathebula, 2017). South African municipalities have changed the lives of the indigents by providing basic services such as water, electricity, houses, road infrastructure, sanitation and refuse removal (Peters, 2012; SALGA, 2014). The indigent policy, particularly in rurally based municipalities imposes adverse effects on the ability to collect adequate revenue by such municipalities. There are municipalities that can generate income through the charging of services rendered to the households within their territories within the Republic but a majority of them fall short (Chauke, Sebola & Mathebula, 2017). According to the Chief Executive Officer of South African Local Government Association (SALGA) Xolile George (2014), revenue collection in municipalities continues to weaken because of the in-depth of debts that the municipalities are in.

In the year 2013 for instance, South African municipalities were owing an amount of R81 billion to Eskom, water supplying companies such as Lepelle Water, Rand Water and other private companies that provide services on behalf of the municipality, just within a year the amount rambled up to R93.4 billion (National Treasury, 2013). Most of the money includes money owed by the residents, government institutions and corporate consumers of municipal services. With this brief background, this paper therefore aims to assess the non-payment of service charges and the impact it has on the ability of municipalities to effectively deliver services using Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality as a case study. In doing so, the paper begins by providing statement of the research problem with a view of providing a rationale that necessitated the undertaking of the study. Furthermore, the paper provides literature that relates to service charges and service delivery, methods adopted and the analysis of findings. The last part of the paper provides for the conclusion and recommendations.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

After 30 years of the democratic dispensation, South Africans find themselves owing thousands of rands to municipalities (National Treasury, 2024). Municipalities have therefore struggled to deliver basic services as mandated by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. This has led to an increase in service delivery protests, where residents complain about the billing systems for basic services (Morudu, 2017). The concern has been that the problem is either with meter readings or municipal officials cannot operate or interpret the meter readings (Maharaj, 2012: 24). South Africa is at a critical stage where the economy is unstable and faces various socio-economic woes. According to Van Vuuren (2016), there is a high rate of unemployment, and



people are being retrenched from their work, which leads to the citizens being unable to pay for municipal bills and service charges. Failure to pay bills lead to municipalities being in debts which cannot be settled over a short period because of the inability to generate enough revenue through services rendered to the citizen. The question now is, if municipalities are in debts and they are rendering services to communities which are not paying for such services, how will the debts of the other be paid? Why is it that there are households in Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality that are paying for municipal services and there are those that are not paying and what is the impact of such on service delivery at Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality? This article attempts to answer these and other questions through literature and primary data collected from participants.

NON-PAYMENT OF SERVICE CHARGES IN MUNICIPALITIES

According to McKerchar and Evans (2009), non-compliance for payment of services is a continual and mounting challenge globally, and this challenge is more robust in developing countries such as South Africa. Infrastructure Dialogues (2015:1), states that paying for municipal rates and charges is one of South Africa's consistent challenges. Bonjean and Chanbas (2004) argue that non-compliance results from ignorance of tax legislation and not necessarily deliberate evasion. Therefore, that being the reason, in developing countries, people from rural areas and informal settlements do not pay for the services they receive from government. South Africa and many other developing countries experience such challenges regularly.

According to Nekhavhambe (2014:1149), people in most rural areas are illiterate and have lack of trust in the political leaders and they tend to have a negative attitude when coming to paying for services rendered by government rather than having fears of the consequences of levies evasion. On a similar note, Infrastructure Dialogues (2015) states that the municipal clients' confidence has deteriorated, and the consumers feel that they are wrongly billed as there is no clear liaison between the consumers and the municipality. Therefore, this shows that there is still a challenge of community participation in municipalities and lack of proper communication between the municipalities and the citizens (Mathebula, 2015; Molaba, 2016:2).

According to Haycock (2005:53), the municipal management must have some engagements with the communities to explain the connection between the payment for services and service delivery in improving the lives of the citizens. This will, in turn, enlighten the community members so that they comprehend the rationale and consequences of non-payment for municipal services. Community participation in municipality's decision-making is important because there will be no confusion and if there will be an issue that the communities do not understand, they will freely consult for clarity (Mathebula, 2015). Communication is one of the important tools in organisations and in the public realm, the absence of good communication methods between the government and the communities brings progress to halt (Sebola, 2017:29). Peters (2011b) states that non-payment of municipal services has potential to cripple financial state of municipalities.



Non-payment of municipal services has a negative impact on the viability and sustainability of municipalities and to the wellbeing of the citizens. There are various factors that have been identified to be influencing non-payments of service charges, such as inability to pay, unemployment, inequality in the society, lack of willingness to pay for municipal services and loss of trust in government. Non-payment of consumer debts continues to haunt the South African Local Government since the Apartheid era where it was used as one of the measures to boycott government, unfortunately it carried on into the then-new government. Below are the effects of non-payment of municipal services charges that continue to cause unrest in the country.

COLLAPSE IN SERVICE DELIVERY PROVISION

It is commonly recognised that one of the utmost challenges faced by South African Local Government is dealing with service delivery bottlenecks while at the same time ensuring that costs of service provision are recovered (Ciaran, 2019). One of the inevitable facts that fuels non-payment of municipal service charges is the culture of entitlement, whereby citizens feel that they deserve to get free basic services. That notion has continued since 1994, when the democratic government came in to power. Non-payment of municipal services has become the tradition to most of the households in the Country, this challenge has been carried through from the Apartheid government to the Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma era of governance (Kanyane, 2014:93). Unfortunately, the collapse in service delivery continued even to the sixth administration under the leadership of President Cyril Ramaphosa.

The continuation of the non-payment trend slowly causes a collapse in service delivery because most, if not all South African municipalities are owed millions by citizens who do not pay for their service charges bills (Chauke, Sebola & Mathebula, 2017). It is obvious that the government continues to face complications in the delivery of basic municipal services even after 30 years of democracy. The revenue that is supposed to be collected by municipalities helps them in reliable and consistent service delivery, maintenances of the available infrastructure and the day to day operation of the municipality. Non-payment of municipal services leads to inconsistent service provision, project stagnation, lack of rural economic development, local economic development and the ineffective service provision.

SERVICE DELIVERY PROTESTS

According to Mafunisa, Sebola, and Tsheola (2012:209), service delivery protests have become the order of the day in South Africa whenever the citizens have unsatisfactory issues and conflict with the local government leadership, be it councillors or the municipal officials. The Country has seen a rise in protests which led to vandalization of government facilities and public infrastructures such as roads, schools, clinics, and government buildings. According to Mpehle (2012), these protests have emerged because citizens are not satisfied with the quality and



quantity of services they are receiving from government. Citizens feel that they are being denied access to services that they are worthy of, but the government is failing to deliver. According to National Planning Commission (2011:12), the African National Congress (ANC) steered government has widened access to private and public services for many citizens despite its failures. Tsheola (2012:161) notes that the roots of protests remain contested because some are being viewed as politically based and others perceive them as services based. Sebake and Sebola (2014:748) believe that there are third parties influencing protests, as some of these protests occur in areas where services are available and effective.

Chuenyane (2009:6) has argued that the citizens are protesting because they have lost hope and confidence in their political leadership. Therefore, to show their grievances, they take it to the streets to burn tyres and ruin infrastructures that they will still need in the future. With reference to this, during the year 2015, 2016 and early 2017, citizens in the Thulamela Local Municipality area protested and burned around 21 schools which led to learners being unable to attend school and road commuters struggling to pass through the area. This was so as the community members wanted the Municipal Demarcation Board to create a municipality that will serve them alone not with the Malamulele (Mathebula, 2018). According to African Times (2016), tribalism was the cause of the uprisings between Malamulele and Vuwani. The Malamulele citizens (Tsongas) did not want to be in the same municipality as the Venda tribe.

Tsheola (2012:170) notes that the prevalence of service delivery protests displays the failure of the Integrated Development Plan in imposing the government's will on citizens. Govender (2016:21), stipulated that the frequent occurrence of service delivery protests around the country designate that municipalities have not been able to effectively encounter service delivery outputs. Auditor General Makwetu (2017:2) believes that if basic principles of liability, built around a central theme of resilient internal control and respectable governance, are in place, municipalities should be well geared to live up to the prospects of the communities that they serve. Then there will be a decline in service delivery protests.

PUBLIC MISTRUST

South Africans continue to lose trust in government due to poor service delivery, empty promises from the politicians and those in power (Mathebula, 2014). The key factor in the drop of citizens' trust in the South African government is the high public perception of corruption among elected leaders. On daily basis, South Africans are exposed to reports by media about the corrupt activities taking place in government. Trust in government depends on how the government structures manages its systems, when the government fails to fulfil what is expected of them by the society, they then lose trust and are regarded as failure and untrustworthy and undeserving of public trust (Mathebula & Makamu, 2014). According to OECD (2013:29), citizens of countries with high levels of corruption place less value on political bodies and are less assured in their political arrangement. Perceived or experienced corruption leads to public disaffection with political institutions and reduce government validity. Many corruption scandals including the



VBS saga where the finances of the bank were stolen by the shareholders for their own benefit at the expense of the poor, appear to have contributed to the loss of trust in politicians and government (Mathebula & Masiya, 2020). There are various factors that lead to mistrust of government by the citizens such as unfair governance, dishonesty in politicians, the abuse of power. Other citizens do not pay for service charges because they do not trust that their money will serve its purpose but be stolen by the corrupt officials. Mistrust in government creates a political environment in which it becomes more difficult for leaders to lead. In such environments, there are continuous protests, and the citizens are unruly.

RESEARCH METHODS ADOPTED

According to Mafuwane (2012:67), research design is a plan that a researcher uses to select a subject for the research, research area and data collection procedures to give answers to the research questions. This paper followed both qualitative and quantitative methods. A mixed method is being commended for its ability to produce more complete analysis and for complementing each other. A qualitative research design was done through the purposive administration of questionnaires to the community members from the few selected communities within the Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality. The questionnaires were followed by a qualitative detailed interview for the municipal community. The data collected was supported by the inclusion of documents. Thus, to ensure that the information collected is fringed and comprehensive to enable the researcher to reach a sensible conclusion.

Data Analysis and Interpretation of Findings

Questionnaires and interviews were conducted with the selected municipal officials, making up 12 municipal officials interviewed. Fortunately, as planned, all the officials identified agreed to participate in the study. Therefore, data analysis in this section is based on the 12 interviews done with the municipal officials and 60 respondents from selected communities within the Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The Nature and Extent of Non-Payment of Municipal Services in Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality

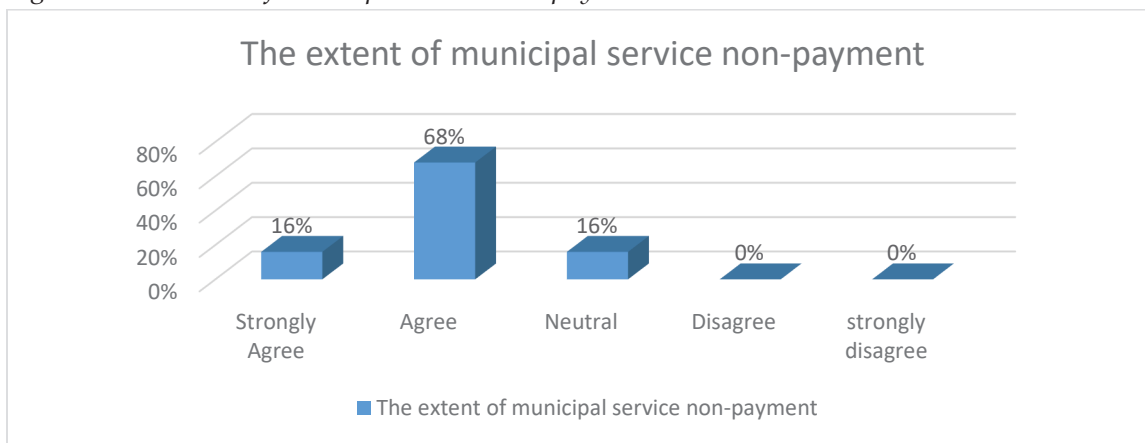
Non-payment continues to be a threat to South African municipalities; therefore, this section determines the depth and origin of non-payment of municipal services in Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality. Municipalities have been granted a mandate to charge levies on services provided, services such as provision of electricity, water and sanitation, refuse removal, property rates, stadiums and parks. It is a responsibility of every municipality to have a sustainable revenue collection in order to be able to render services, maintain the basic services such as municipal



roads and also to maintain the day to day operation of the municipality. It is unfortunate that South African Citizens are not complying with the municipal orders.

Data from interviews conducted indicated that 100% of the staff complement at Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality agree that the municipality experiences challenges with non-payment for municipal services. It is without doubt that the municipality has non-payment challenges as 80% of its communities are rural villages and only a small percentage is made up of urban area or a suburban area. Rural municipalities experience non-payment of municipal services due to various socio-economic challenges that are in existence throughout South Africa (Chauke, Sebola & Mathebula, 2017). Further to this, a questionnaire probed the extent of non-payment using predetermined questions.

Figure 1: The extent of municipal service non-payment



The figure above reveals that the municipality experience non-payment of municipal service. An average of 68% of the officials concurred that there is a high percentage of non-payment of municipal services. Sixteen percent strongly agreed that Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality is experiencing non-payment of municipal services and 16% were neutral regarding the non-payment. From the figure above it is visible that nobody denied the fact that the Municipality does not have a challenge of non-payment for services delivered. It can therefore be deduced from these responses that the Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality, just like other rurally based municipalities in South Africa fails to collect charges for the services they render. This consequently means that service deliver is unsustainable.

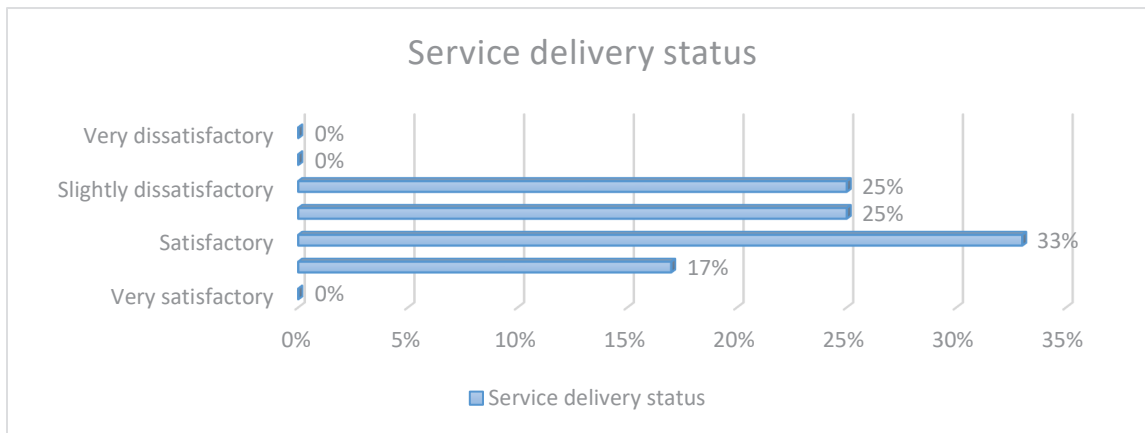
The effects of non-payment on service delivery

For a municipality to be able to render services effectively sustainably, it needs a consistent and reliable revenue income. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 entrusted local government with the power to render services to the communities. Unfortunately, the South African democracy is 30 years old, yet millions of citizens continue to protest for service delivery. Therefore, it is important to know if Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality is able to render services



to its communities due to non-payment of services by the residents of the Municipality. This information was sought so that it becomes easy to track the success and or failures of service delivery by Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality due to revenue associated challenges. The data is presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Non-payment and service delivery



The figure above indicates that 25% of the municipal officials' rates service delivery as slightly dissatisfactory. Meanwhile, the other quarter 25% rates service delivery as neutral, meaning that it is neither satisfactory nor dissatisfactory. There is also 33% that rates service delivery as satisfactory while there is a 17% that perceives service delivery by Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality as moderate.

According to the responses of Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality employees, service delivery within the municipality is not bad as perceived but this is in contradiction to what the communities have to say. This is evident in the number of service delivery protests that occurs in different communities within the territory of the municipality. According to Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality 2018/2019 Integrated Development Plan, the municipality is experiencing backlogs in terms of electricity connection due to mushrooming of new stands in almost all communities. The municipality is also experiencing water and sanitation challenges in its remote areas due to damaged water reservoirs and ponds in Denilton, Motetema and Rosenekal. Meaning in this case, only residents within Groblersdal formal settlement do not experience water challenges except those in Masakaneng, which is an informal extension of Groblersdal town. All of these service delivery related challenges are blamed by municipal officials on non-payment of services my municipal residents. According to SALGA as of 2013/2014 the consumer debt also known as non-payments of services was at 100 billion, which is equal to the total local government operational expenditure for a year. Meaning that if municipalities were able to recover all the money that is owed by the communities, it would enable them to do more in terms



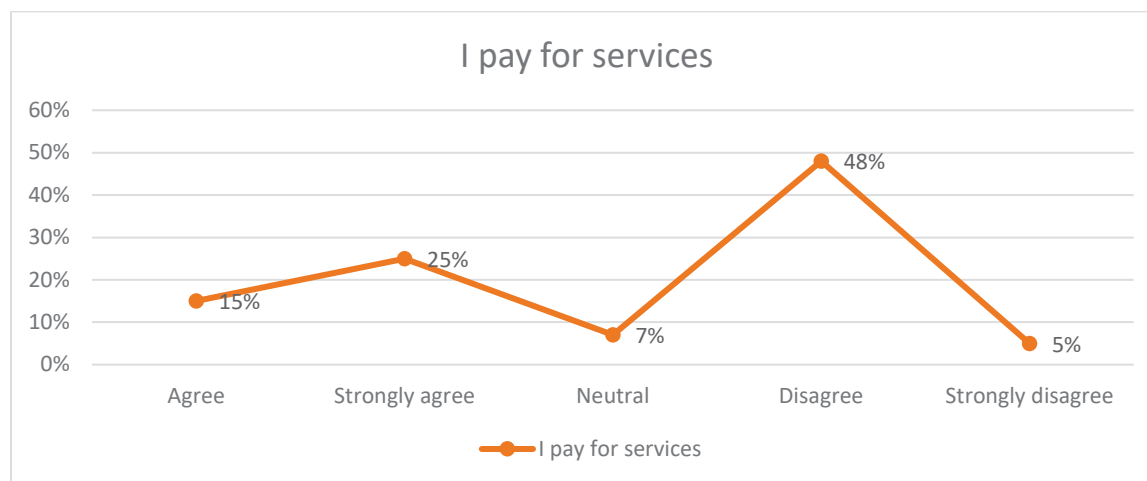
of service delivery. SALGA concurs that non-payment is a multi-faceted challenge, which has no single solution.

Non-payment of rates, service charges and other tariffs started in the black communities in the 1980s as a measure of boycotting the then apartheid government, it was then vindicated, and it was also taken for granted that this would just fade out after the political evolution to a democratic dispensation. However, 30 years after the historic change to democracy in South Africa, non-payment of services continues to pose a stern financial challenge to municipalities (Van Schalkwyk, 2010:94). Non-payment of municipal services by citizens and business people disrupt the municipality in paying its service providers such as Eskom, which in turn delays service delivery (Ramabitsa, 2014:27).

Compliance with Service Charges Payments

Not all citizens are compliant with the regulations of the local government in relation to playing an obligation in the form of paying for services used. This question was probed to get the percentages of those who pay and those who do not pay for services charges in Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality. The data on whether the community members within Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality pays for service charges is presented in the figure below.

Figure 3: I pay for services



The above findings reveal that most households do not pay for municipal services at Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality because 48% disagreed to be paying for municipal services. 5% of the households strongly disagreed that they do pay for service charges. Meanwhile 7% remained neutral whether they are paying or not paying. Furthermore, 25% strongly agreed to be paying for municipal services and 15% agreed to be paying for municipal services. The information shown in the above figure confirms the depth of non-payment of municipal services within the Municipality, which is not a good reflection on the state of the payment of municipal services in



the Municipality. The data shows that community members that are paying are few compared to that are not paying. It is without much of a doubt that while the non-payment of services has a strong negative implication on the capability to render sustainable services. What is however unclear are the reasons for failing to pay for services utilised despite various demanding techniques adopted by the municipality.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality is undeniably experiencing problems with households failing to pay for municipal services such as water and sanitation, refuse removal and electricity. The failure of payment is due to numerous reasons, including poverty, unemployment, and unwillingness to pay for services. It is only minority group from Motetema and Groblersdal that acknowledged that they do pay for municipal services. Another contributing factor to the non-payment for services is the fact that the majority of the population rated the services as not satisfactory. There is widespread dissatisfaction with the quality of services offered by the municipality. Hence that affect the willingness of the community to pay for the services and that on the other hand fuels the increase of service delivery within the municipality. A bigger portion of the population felt that it was the Government's responsibility to deliver services for free and to ensure that they are maintained without the communities contributing anything. The above situation is unsustainable and needs to be corrected through an open interaction between the municipality and the communities. Non-payment of municipal services continues to threaten the sustainability of local government sphere in South Africa. On the basis of this, this paper recommends the following:

When the services rendered are not of quality, not having a decent quality standard, the citizens see no reason to pay for such service, because basically, people pay for what is valuable, sustainable, worthy and satisfactory. Concrete financial management and good governance assures a municipality's financial viability. According to Mantzaris (2014:81), Financial viability is measured in terms of a municipality's capacity to meet its financial responsibilities in a justifiable manner. It is important that municipal stakeholders, must have a sound basic knowledge of the Local Government: Municipal Finance Management Act, 56 of 2003 and other related legislation and their application. This will assist the municipality in the sense that it will maintain good financial control and it will not be easy to mismanage funds as the internal controls will be intact.

Municipalities must also strengthen internal controls. The delay in delivering services is because of the process flow that involve many human resources and resulting in red tape. Furthermore, the municipality needs to consult with the communities before the start of any project in the communities, because another factor that delays projects is a bad relationship among stakeholders. The municipality must ensure that it improves its internal administration, improve on enforcement measures and engage with the communities continuously.

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