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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT CONTEXT: DURING AND POST COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

This paper extensively investigates the effectiveness of public accountability mechanisms in the South African local government context during and post the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic. Therefore, this paper argues that the adopted public accountability mechanisms at the municipal level are rigid and not adaptive to the new normal ushered in by the Covid-19 pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic forced many countries including South Africa, to adopt policies to control mass gatherings and community events, as they are believed to be super-spreader events. Local governments habitually used public meetings to inform communities about issues and consult them about development programs affecting them directly before the Covid-19 pandemic. This paper is purely conceptual, relied profoundly on literature to fortify the argument. This study utilizes a qualitative research technique to achieve the objectives of this study. The study reveals that the adopted and established public accountability mechanisms at the local government sphere are not adaptive and effective to the new normal. The conclusion that can be drawn from this paper is that there is an urgent need for the government to revisit and formulate more adaptive and effective public accountability mechanisms.

Keywords: Public Accountability, Covid-19 Pandemic, Service Delivery, Local Government

1. Introduction

The South African government has steadily committed substantial attention and precious resources to the local realm of government, to fulfil its constitutional obligations and responsibilities (Munzhedzi, 2016). Republic of South Africa (RSA) (1996) lays a foundation for the three spheres of government to be held accountable. Section 152(1) (a) of the Constitution of the RSA of 1996 stresses the significance of public accountability in local government. It mandates that municipalities must foster democratic and accountable governance. According to Saila (2017), the primary responsibility of local councilors is to make sure that the municipality in its totality is accountable to the people it governs. Most of the African countries elect their governments through democratic processes, especially South Africa, hence the concern for accountability to the public. South Africa is a democratic country the government is accountable to the public since the majority vote of the citizens elect the ruling party. According to the Republic of South Africa (RSA) (1996), significant legal frameworks that support accountable local

government include the Municipal Structures Act, No. 117 (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 1998a), the White Paper on Local Government (Republic of South Africa, 1998b), the Municipal Systems Act, No. 32 (Republic of South Africa, 2000), and the Municipal Finance Management Act, No. 56 (Republic of South African, 2003). The Municipal Structures Act (1998) (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 1998a) advocates for accountability through oversight structures as provided by Sections 79 and 80. While the Municipal Systems Act (2000) has established the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) as a mechanism for every municipality to develop and mandates that locally elected councilors must account to the community members.

Poor basic service delivery in many local communities in South Africa has forced communities to embark on service delivery protests as a way of demanding accountability from government officials (Shava and Mubangizi, 2019). Before the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic in the South African local municipalities, sustaining public accountability has been a problem for many local government officials, caused by a lack of awareness of public accountability and reticence to account to communities on how public funds are used. The COVID-19 is a respiratory virus that has posed a significant developmental problem because most economies across the world have been under lockdown since the first quarter of 2020 (Munzhedzi, 2021).

The pandemic and subsequent lockdown restrictions prohibit mass gatherings and community events, as they are believed to be super-spreader events. Local government representatives habitually used public meetings to inform communities about issues and consult them about development programs affecting them directly before the Covid-19 pandemic. These hard lockdown restrictions have created an opportunity for government officials to escape public accountability. The purpose of this paper is to assess the efficacy of public accountability mechanisms in the context of South African local government during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. Possible effective and adaptive mechanisms would be recommended to enhance public accountability in the local government sphere.

2. Understanding public accountability

Munzhedzi (2021) asserts that citizen participation and engagement in government initiatives and activities, as well as leaders' accountability to the appropriate frameworks for their actions, are all elements of public accountability. Public accountability, according to Sizani (2018), is the necessity that government officials or institutions account for their activities, disclose information about their choices and actions, explain and justify their decisions, take responsibility for them, and publicly reveal the effects. Fundamentally, public accountability necessitates that public official be held responsible and more crucially, to face penalties when obligations and promises are not fulfilled. On the other hand, Saila (2017, p. 13) defines public accountability in the milieu of South African local government as the "obligation to explain and justify conduct and decisions to a stakeholder". Public accountability makes it possible for municipalities to answer to the local needs and demands of major community stakeholders such as the local community, lobby groups, and politicians. However, Mamokhere (2020, p. 130), postulates that "public accountability is a key cornerstone of good governance. Therefore, it can further be clarified that public accountability is an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility". Public accountability begins the moment someone expects responsibilities or has a vested position to utilize public resources (Munzhedzi, 2016). Public accountability and transparency include the commitment to discover and clarify the exercises and impacts of such activities (Nzimakwe, 2014).

3. Research methodology and design
3.1. Research design

Kumar (2011) regards research designs as a systematic strategy adopted by academics while responding to problems of research. As far as Pandey and Pandey (2015) are concerned, these are the frameworks of the study used in data collection and analysis. Qualitative techniques provide usually extensive data which inform your study with ideas and thoughts. MacDonald and Headlam (2014) argue that they can expose people's feelings and how they believe without

presenting a quantitative of those targets who feel or think like that. This study has utilized a qualitative research technique. This short discusses a qualitative design hereafter.

3.2. Qualitative design

Bryman (2012) defines qualitative research as the collection of social data that is centered on meaning and provides substantial insight into the local perspectives of study populations. They can add to data that is culturally relevant and contextually rich (Mack *et al.* 2005). The qualitative study focuses on interpretative or vital social science concepts, with a focus on the language of "cases and contexts" and cultural meaning (Neuman, 2014). While following a nonlinear research route, a qualitative investigation is supported by logic that emerges from continuous practice (Neuman, 2014). The published literature was evaluated and summarized methodically. Peer-reviewed journal publications, books, government laws, and online sources were all used in this procedure. Consequently, the author used a qualitative research technique to achieve the objectives of this study, relying on secondary data. As a result, the study gathered data from a variety of sources, including newspapers, reports, articles, books, and other publicly accessible sources.

4. Theoretical framework on local government and public accountability

The theoretical framework serves as a basis for the study's underpinnings and provides structure and support, as well as the rationale from which all information for the investigation is derived (Grant and Osanloo, 2014). This paper draws tentative grounds from the New Public Management (NPM) Theory to comprehend public accountability in the South African Local government context. The origins of NPM theory can be traced back to public-choice theory and management theories. This theory was first established in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Fatemi and Behmaesh, 2012). Additionally, it results from a merger of economic theories and private-sector management practices targeted at enhancing government service delivery efficacy and efficiency. Rulashe (2015) indicates that the NPM theory is a public administration method that draws on insights and practices from commerce and other fields to enhance the effectiveness, efficacy and general performance of government services in contemporary bureaucracies. The NPM approach is founded on a set of principles, one of which is accountability (Saila, 2017).

Shava and Mubangizi (2019) assert that the NPM model that has since been created to address the service delivery problems confronting local governments underpins the need for social responsibility in South Africa. The model is based on the idea that citizens have the right to demand accountability and that public officials must cater to their needs. The NPM theory suggests that public officials must be directly accountable to citizens (Rulashe, 2015). It prioritizes citizens over government and advocates for the elected ward councilors to use public resources effectively and efficiently (Saila, 2017). Under the NPM theory, citizens can employ public accountability mechanisms to engage public officials on service delivery issues. As a result, the NPM theory was utilized to examine local government accountability relationships as well as the degree to which public accountability instruments are employed to embed or foster accountability in local governments (Saila, 2017).

5. Factors affecting the success of public accountability mechanisms

The effectiveness of public accountability mechanisms in the South African local government is determined by a variety of enabling factors that can act both for and against state institutions' ability or willingness to account to citizens. Firstly, poverty and unemployment, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated poverty and unemployment conditions in most South African rural communities (Jain *et al.* 2020). Shava and Mubangizi (2019) indicate that corruption, poor infrastructure, constrained access to resources, and unequal distribution of wealth are hurdles to social accountability and improved service delivery. Pillay (2016) proclaims that corruption both as a concept and practice is a social and economic distortion of local development and

establishing accountable local governments in South Africa. Corruption and fraud have eroded citizens' trust in government institutions, putting public accountability in local governments in jeopardy. Consequently, lack of accountability for poor services delivered to local communities' results in distressing effects for the destitute who do not have access to essential services.

Secondly, political interference in local government management discourages citizens from demanding social accountability. Mngomezulu (2020) found out that political involvement by the incumbent party in municipal management poses a hurdle of poor service delivery in wards headed by opposing parties. According to Mdlongwa (2014), the number of violent service delivery demonstrations has increased throughout the country, with citizens upset with the sluggish speed of delivery as well as corrupt activities that have become prevalent in certain municipalities. Shava and Mubangizi (2019) are of the view that political bickering for top municipal positions and misuse of existing resources lead to corruption and ultimately, poor accountability to communities. Also, Sikhakane and Reddy (2011) support this view by asserting that political office bearers' power on senior municipal officials will cause them to be more loyal to their political leaders while neglecting accountability to the public, especially if appointments are on a temporary basis.

Thirdly, lack of skills and competence, Saila's (2017) highlights that the inability of ward councilors to communicate with communities because of lack communication skills, ultimately impede public accountability. According to Shava and Mubangizi (2019), the ability of institutions to carry out processes like social audits or public spending tracking is crucial to the effectiveness of social accountability mechanisms. In South Africa, government actors are required to exercise accountability, even though public officials' competency is often lacking (Munzhedzi, 2016). Citizens often lack the capacity to demand public accountability from their public officials as a result of political differences or interests. The last factor is corruption, it is in the plain that the Covid-19 pandemic created harmony for corruption activities in all spheres of government, while lockdown restrictions prevented the public from demanding accountability. Shava and Mubangizi (2019) point out that corruption has thrived in government institutional as a result of the poor design of state departments. Concurrently, allude that exercising accountability becomes difficult when corruption is at its peak. One can conclude that corruption in government institutions causes citizens' mistrust and public protests, which are a result of a lack of transparency and accountability to the public.

6. Public accountability mechanisms in the local government realm

Sikhakane and Reddy (2011) postulate that accountability is an important component of good administration, and it is strengthened by public participation, openness, and responsiveness. There are several accountability mechanisms used by citizens to demand accountability in service delivery from local municipalities. However, this paper focuses on some of the mechanisms, which include, amongst others izimbizos and ward committees. The reason to solely focus on these two mechanisms is primarily that they involve the public.

6.1. Izimbizos

Izimbizos, are used as participatory tools to fortify public participation, instill accountability and perhaps provide feedback on service delivery issues (Baloyi and Luninga, 2017). Sikhakane and Reddy (2011) indicate that izimbizos are an enabling platform for government officials and leaders to hold public meetings with people in their local areas. Additionally, this form of public participation is significant since it enables communities to engage directly with their government representatives. Shava and Mubangizi (2019) posit that izimbizos are vital because they allow citizens to engage government officials in constructive debates about the quality and plan of service delivery in their communities. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has propelled the limited number of people at mass meetings and an urgent need for alternative channels of accountability. With the subsequent lockdown restrictions on mass gatherings, izimbizos proved to be ineffective forms of holding government officials accountable. This traditional form of holding government accountable officials needs to be transformed or advanced into an effective and adaptable form

of accounting. Shava and Mubangizi (2019) contend that izimbizos give citizens a permitting platform to engage with the government; nevertheless, citizen involvement is essential for izimbizos to work well for successful service delivery. Arguably, the Covid-19 pandemic, altered the need to digitize this form of accountability, however, communities need to be provided with enabling infrastructure and inculcated with skills to effectively engage with government officials remotely. Also, ward councilors need to be inculcated with the necessary skills on how to effectively disseminate information to communities using newly digitized forms of communication.

6.2. Ward committees

Shava and Mubangizi (2019) state that ward committees were established in 2001 as the primary instruments for community engagement in local government matters are advocating for the need for accountability at the grassroots level in South Africa. Ward committees are seen to be effective political instruments for rallying community support and strengthening the capacity structures of community meetings (Mazenda and Masiya, 2018). Meanwhile, Shava and Mubangizi (2019) point out that ward committees are underappreciated as social accountability tools because their effect in holding the state responsible appears to be less powerful. However, Sikhakane and Reddy (2011) proclaim that ward committees are essential local government structures that allow citizens to participate in decision-making. The Covid-19 pandemic and consequent lockdown restrictions prevented citizens from participating in decision-making processes. According to Shava and Mubangizi (2019) ward committees are said to be doing very little justice when it comes to demanding accountability, which might be due to cultural differences and a lack of trust in ward councilors.

7. Findings

The extensive review of literature in this paper revealed the hurdles that the current public accountability mechanisms face and will continue to face in the new normal ushered in by the Covid-19 pandemic. The study reveals that the adopted and established public accountability at the local government sphere are not adaptive and effective to the new normal ushered in by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is revealed that since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, the channels of accounting and reporting have been hindered. During the Covid-19 pandemic, imbizos and wards committees become inactive and ineffective public accountability mechanisms. This created a shelter for government officials to freely engage in corruption activities and misuse public funds without being accountable. The literature found out that corruption, inadequate skills, political influence, and noncompliance with regulations all have a negative impact on municipalities' ability to implement effective public accountability mechanisms. It is undeniably in the plain that the Covid-19 pandemic has altered a new shift on how governments should account and report back to the public. The study discovered that the traditional channels of public accountability such as imbizos and ward committees need to be revised and reformed for them to be adjustable to future uncertainties for continued effective public accountability. The empirical literature revealed the significance of embracing digital platforms for effective public accountability. This ensures that public officials are continually held accountable remotely even in global calamities such as Covid-19 pandemic.

8. Conclusion and recommendations

South African local governments continue to face several difficulties due to a lack of effective mechanisms to foster accountability. Corruption, inadequate skills, political influence, and noncompliance with regulations all have a negative impact on municipalities' ability to implement effective public accountability mechanisms. The Covid-19 pandemic has also exacerbated the ineffectiveness of public accountability mechanisms at the local sphere of government. However, some of the measures that might be used to solve the aforementioned problems are as follows:

- Accounting officers in government institutions should adopt effective and efficient recruiting strategies to attract and retain skillful employees who would implement appropriate accountability measures.
- Local communities must be inculcated with skills on how to engage government officials using technological platforms such as (municipal official websites, Facebook, social networks platforms, and Twitter).
- Local governments must provide communities with infrastructure that enable effective access to internet connection such as Wi-Fi hotspots.
- Local government institutions must ensure that their digital platforms are functional and frequently monitored.
- The political leadership should strengthen its oversight duties through platforms such as Public Accounts Committees and Municipal Public Accounts Committees at the local level to guarantee that lawbreakers are dealt with. These oversight committees' abilities must also be strengthened by nominating representatives with the ability to hold the executive responsible.

Public accountability mechanisms are vital in addressing corruption and the lack of accountability within government institutions. Also, they help to foster the obligation of government officials as especially in the local government sphere to deliver services. Modern Information and Communication Technology (ICT) technologies may be efficiently used to enforce accountability to communities while also allowing communities to voice their complaints about service delivery.

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