Monitoring and evaluation as critical approach to enhance the performance of local government: South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The present study undertakes an analysis of monitoring and evaluation as a pragmatic methodology for enhancing the efficacy of municipalities in the context of South Africa. Research findings indicate that a significant obstacle faced by South African municipalities is the issue of substandard performance. These aspects can be linked to several reasons, such as inadequate allocation of resources, limitations in capacity, and deficiencies in monitoring and assessment processes. This article posits that the use of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is crucial in addressing instances of suboptimal performance within municipalities. There exists a necessity to enhance the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems in order to attain efficient performance management and ensure the provision of high-quality service delivery. The research was conducted among three distinct municipalities, namely Amajuba, uThukela, and uMgungundlovu, located in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). The sample population comprised of municipal officials belonging to the Performance Management System (PMS) and Corporate Services units. The study employed a qualitative methodology and deliberately selected important participants who possessed knowledge and a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter under investigation. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the sample size consisted of 20 people. The researchers organized focus group conversations in order to gather data, which was subsequently controlled through the utilization of the NVivo software application. The findings of the study indicate that monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is a crucial component in enhancing the performance of local government. Its primary purpose is to establish the essential circumstances for achieving greater levels of performance that are sustainable over an extended period. Municipalities are required to demonstrate a firm dedication to the prioritization and adoption of municipal monitoring and evaluation (M&E) as an essential tool for facilitating progressive local governance. This commitment involves the institutionalization of M&E practices, the enforcement of mandatory adherence to established systems and procedures, the integration of information technology systems to enhance and fortify the implementation of M&E, and the utilization of participatory M&E approaches to assess the effectiveness of municipal functions and development endeavors.

Introduction

The absence of monitoring and evaluation has been recognized as a deficiency within the public sector in South Africa. According to Jili and Mthethwa (2016), it is argued that state institutions have not fully acknowledged the significance of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) as a tool for performance management. This is primarily due to the lack of adequate monitoring and evaluation systems that can effectively assess the performance of government and service delivery, both prior to and following the implementation of service delivery initiatives. According to Matsiliza (2018), the performance of municipalities is not meeting expectations, which can be attributed to various issues, one of which is the absence of adequate monitoring and assessment endeavors.
mechanisms. The ongoing challenge of implementing monitoring and evaluation in local government persists, as municipalities face difficulties in fulfilling their constitutional obligation of delivering services. These challenges arise from shortcomings in the assessment and monitoring of functions that are intended to expedite service delivery and assess its impact. As a result, this has a negative impact on the overall performance of the municipality. Hence, the significance of monitoring and evaluation in the creation and provision of services cannot be overstated, as they have the potential to provide outcomes associated with enhancements in municipal performance (Eresia-Eke and Boadu, 2019). Within the same framework, Nonyane (2019) acknowledges the government’s commitment to enhancing the quality of life for all individuals through the provision of essential services such as water, electricity, housing, and infrastructure. Consequently, a range of policies, programs, and projects were established. Nevertheless, the primary obstacle confronting the government at present lies in the proficient execution of these policies and programs to effectively tackle issues pertaining to the delivery of basic services. The lack of monitoring and evaluation systems has contributed to the overall dissatisfaction in effectively tracking progress and reporting on the status of developmental activities. This hinders the ability to meet specified targets and accomplish strategic objectives as outlined in the Integrated Development Plan (IDP).

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996) promotes democratic ideals such as equity, civic engagement, operational proficiency, developmental focus, responsibility, and openness, and mandates that public sector entities abide by these ideals. Moreover, these principles require the local government to effectively govern and manage its local affairs. Consequently, the evaluation of operational activities, functions, and service provision is necessary to assess their effectiveness and impact on the public, who serve as custodians of service delivery (Mle, 2014).

Building upon the aforementioned notions, this research investigates Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) as a pivotal approach that municipalities can employ to enhance efficiency and performance. This is particularly significant given that municipalities have the responsibility of delivering critical services to citizens in a manner that is both efficient and effective. The research employs a case study approach and a qualitative technique, with a specific focus on three district municipalities. The sample comprises individuals employed in the municipal sector, specifically in the Corporate Services and Performance Management departments. These individuals were deliberately selected due to their experience and possession of relevant knowledge pertaining to the research issue. The data was collected via focus group talks and subsequently subjected to thematic analysis, resulting in the identification of primary themes. The findings indicated that the implementation of efficient monitoring and evaluation practices inside municipal operations, along with the assessment of service delivery outcomes, can contribute to enhancing government performance and productivity. This study considers monitoring and evaluation (M&E) as a crucial method for evaluating the extent to which municipalities can attain their strategic objectives. The results of this study will make a valuable contribution to the enhancement of service delivery in a manner that is both effective and sustainable. This will be achieved through the comprehensive monitoring of government interventions and the ongoing evaluation of these interventions. The insights gained from this monitoring and evaluation process will have a significant impact on future government interventions, as well as decision-making and policy development within the realm of local government.

The current condition of inadequate performance in the Amajuba, UThukela, and UMngunyundlovu district municipalities, with regards to the attainment of their established objectives and benchmarks, appears to be prevailing. The planning and execution of monitoring and evaluation activities pertaining to municipal operations and service delivery in municipalities are lacking in effectiveness and efficiency. As a consequence, municipalities fail to seize the chance to enhance their operational efficiency through the identification of potential dangers and areas in need of improvement. Singh (2019) posits that municipalities are anticipated to demonstrate outcomes that have a positive impact on the well-being of inhabitants, while simultaneously ensuring the provision of high-quality services. The analysis reveals that monitoring and evaluation practices in these municipalities mostly concentrate on measuring service delivery outputs, while neglecting to assess the broader impact and implications of programs in order to ascertain their attainment of the intended goals as initially envisaged. There is a prevailing expectation that the government will facilitate societal and economic change by devising and executing policies and development initiatives that cater to the requirements of various communities. This endeavor necessitates robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices to assess the efficacy and advantages of these programs, as well as to enhance municipal performance and uphold principles of good governance.

The Municipal Performance Regulations’ requirements for service delivery performance analysis reflected in the uThukela district municipality’s recent mid-year performance assessment report (2021/2022) state that the municipality has fallen short on meeting the performance targets established for each section and department, indicating a decline in achieving the annual performance targets in the 2021-2022 financial year. According to the UMngunyundlovu district mid-year budget and performance review report (2022/2023), the municipality did not achieve 23.2% of its annual targets in the fiscal year 2021/2022, while the Amajuba district municipality only met 36.3% of the target mid-year report (2022). These reflections emphasize that the municipality’s inability to meet the performance targets is what leads to poor performance. Govender (2011) contends that some of the factors that impede the productivity and performance of municipalities are historical, institutional, financial, human resource, financial, leadership, and a lack of M&E specialist skills; hence, municipalities are grappling with implementing a comprehensive M&E system to monitor performance target progress and activities related to achieving quality service delivery. Moreover, they are under a lot of pressure to manage their performance by completing their tasks in an efficient, effective, and cost-effective way. To address these gaps, Govender (2011) suggests that this can only be achieved if suitable M&E systems are in place and the necessary performance management tools are being used.
This research study is organized in the following manner: it begins with an introduction, followed by a problem description. The subsequent sections include a literature review, which encompasses a theoretical review, a conceptual framework, and an empirical evaluation. These sections offer a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between theory and practice. In addition, this paper examines the study technique utilized and provides an analysis of the research findings and subsequent debates. The report finishes by presenting crucial recommendations and providing guidance for future research endeavors.

**Literature review**

This section presents literature review relating to M&E and its contribution towards improved local government performance and service delivery. This section aims to establish important literature from experts or academics who have touched on similar topics of interest. The aim of this effort is to draw attention to key ideas that might help expose linkages between key monitoring, evaluation, and performance in local government. The section also interrogates the theoretical review and conceptual framework in relation to M&E.

**Theoretical review**

This article applied a systems approach theory to understand M&E as one of the important approaches towards achieving strategic goals and improving the performance of local government municipalities.

**Systems approach theory**

The systems theory establish that organisations are open social systems that depend on interaction with their environment to function. According to Luhmann, Baecker and Gilgen (2013) systems take in information or resources from the environment, process them internally and release the results back into the environment to restore environmental balance. The system seeks input to determine if the output was successful in re-establishing equilibrium (As is evident, the systems theory places emphasis on long-term objectives than the short-term goal-attainment approaches, concentrating on the methods and techniques used to assure organisational longevity. By soliciting feedback from the system, an organisation can assess the effectiveness of its output. If the organisation’s actions and messages are ineffectual, the process is repeated until a suitable solution is identified. If an organisation cannot adapt to changes in the environment, it will eventually go out of business, (Whitchurch and Constantine, 2009).

In the context of this study, organisations are established as open social systems that depend on their surroundings for survival and sustainability. This portrays that uThukela, Amajuba, and uMgungundlovu act as an open system organisation operating within the parameters of the public sector. An integral part of the input stated in theory is the endeavor to emphasize the context of national government budget allocation, which provides the municipality with necessities for service delivery. According to the idea, input is essential for completing projects that address basic needs of the citizens. This extends to the development of systems and procedures that guarantee municipalities fulfill their goals, such as evaluation and monitoring systems.

**Conceptual framework**

**Monitoring**

Monitoring is regarded as a tool to assist the government and other government entities to improve how its operational activities are undertaken to achieve strategic goals. Monitoring data and information serve as indication that the government must make policy decisions and hold authorities responsible for their performance operations and service delivery (Ojok, 2016: 8). Monitoring establishes who is in charge of carrying out what tasks during the implementation process and how the process is expected to interact. Practitioners of monitoring are obligated to document information on the state or development of government intervention as they witness it (Uwizeyimana 2020: 12). To ensure that important data and information is not lost, it is necessary for monitoring to be performed often (hourly, daily, weekly, quarterly, monthly, and yearly). Thus, monitoring is the capacity to routinely evaluate progress made in comparison to a chosen plan and to confirm conformity with its constituent parts (monitoring progress in terms of outcomes) (Uwizeyimana 2020: 14).

**Evaluation**

Ojok (2016: 9) describes evaluation as the process of compiling relevant evidence to determine the value of an intervention, in terms of the outcomes produced and whether it achieved the desired results and added value to the relevant stakeholders. Xu, David, and Kim (2018) consider evaluation as all actions taken by various governmental and social actors to assess how a policy has performed in practice and project how it will fare in the future. Kanyamuna, Kotzé and Phiri (2019: 163) opine that evaluation helps in maintaining track of how a policy is carried out or managed and offering suggestions to enhance the process. It functions in a way that measures and assesses if the policy is yielding the desired outcomes. This looks at resource management and assesses if a policy adheres to its design standards. Evaluation is useful in public management, such as in government, since it focuses on performance assessment and the need to control public finances to reach greater levels of value for money, efficiency, and effectiveness. (Kanyamuna, Kotzé and Phiri, 2019: 163).
Performance

The literature considers performance management as a comprehensive approach emphasising the utilisation of tools to ensure the attainment of institutional goals. Organisations commence with the process of assessing performance within the set framework to improve the outcome and results from individuals and the organisation as a whole. According to Van der Waldt (2014: 120), performance management entails a variety of activities designed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the public sector in achieving its strategic goals and objectives, as well as systems and processes designed to measure and manage the performance of individuals, teams, departments, and institutions within the public sector. According to Thornhill (2016:274), performance management is to ensure that workers meet predetermined criteria while carrying out their job responsibilities. In order to maximize public policies and programmes by ongoing evaluation against the established criteria, performance management is an integrated process that identifies, assesses, and monitors employee and institutional performance.

Empirical Review

Monitoring, evaluation, performance, and service delivery in the South African government

Local government in South Africa is largely understood as the sphere centred on service delivery and comprises of municipalities as drivers of basic service delivery and fostering development in communities. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996) assigns the responsibility of service delivery to the local government, and it is tasked with mobilising and channelling its resources towards improving the lives of the people. Recently there has been an increasing demand for local governments to monitor service delivery activities and evaluate their impact. The reason revolves around the need for municipalities to deliver efficient, quality services. To recognise the bottlenecks in its functions related to service delivery, there is a dire need for the adoption and application of monitoring and evaluation within municipal operations and functions. M&E plays a critical role in assessing organisations’ activities, identifying gaps, and strengthening good government by ensuring accountability. A growing body of literature defines M&E as a tool to improve quality service delivery and performance (Lehloha, 2016). Scholars such as Nonyane (2019) points out that M&E is an approach that equips employers and employees with information on the assessment of functions and periodically measure the performance using a set of tools and technique. This is to ensure that the systems in place support institutions in promoting the effectiveness and efficiency of services by monitoring policies, programmes and projects and evaluating the impact on services rendered. If implemented effectively, M&E can serve as an early warning indicator, informing managers and practitioners on the progress of programmes and interventions and detecting faults and discrepancies that might occur. Management can then make informed decisions on the results and take action to modify or discontinue the programme.

It is important to note that there are rising concerns about the lack of service delivery in municipalities in South Africa, consequently, the absence of M&E is one of the contributors because of the unavailability of proper systems and tools to assist management in improving ways in which tasks are undertaken to achieve the strategic goals of local government. For municipalities to maintain continuous improvement in service delivery, performance mechanisms must be formulated and implemented to monitor, review, and implement objectives sets out in the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) and evaluate progress made in achieving those objectives. The public sector considers performance management to get better results by collecting information on the internal functions and indicates how well the institution is meeting the targets, which policies and processes are effective and are in line with the strategic goal of the institution. It facilitates accountability by enabling the government, stakeholders, and members of the public to track progress, identify areas of improvement and provide a better understanding of issues about service delivery programmes and projects (Mokoele et.al, 2018).

Monitoring and Evaluation as an approach towards improved performance and service delivery

Monitoring, according to (Ojok, 2016) is the systematic gathering of information on predetermined indicators to inform management and stakeholders of the status and accomplishment of objectives. On the other hand, evaluation comprises a thorough examination of a programme that is ongoing or that has already been finished. The purpose is to evaluate the efficacy, efficiency, and impact of the goals being met. This represents the value and importance of the programme. In addition, monitoring is descriptive in nature since it provides data on the organization's progress towards the goals stated, whereas evaluation provides proof as to why goals are met or failed to be achieved (Uwizeyimana 2020). When used as a function, M&E is a crucial component of managing an organization since it involves a system of communication supporting the organization in the implementation of projects and programmes. Considering the aforementioned, M&E is recognized as one of the important instruments that had a substantial impact on organizational performance, programme, and policy.

Hassan (2019) agrees by stating that performance is the advancement and accomplishment of results. As monitoring and evaluation are a component of the larger notion of performance management, the requirement to show performance is imposing additional demands on them. By application, Hassan (2019) emphasizes that M&E focuses on organizational plans, training, and surveys, whereas performance focuses on the number of deliverables achieved, timeliness, and organizational cost, as well as additional intervention variables like skilled staff members, funding, and effective use of technology. The performance of the organization suffers if M&E is poor or does not exist. This suggests that in order to give essential information on the developmental initiatives and functions of the organization, M&E procedures and activities in the public sector must be credible and trustworthy.
The performance of the organization is measured by how well its goals and objectives are met. Organizations must make sure that they keep track of whether an activity is carried out in line with the plans during the program implementation phase. If not, evaluations offer information on why it is or is not, allowing management to make necessary adjustments to the organizational plan. This suggests that implementing monitoring and evaluation is essential for improving an organization's overall performance. The evolution of the South African government over the past 28 years of democracy has shown great step in transforming the public service with the integration of public administration through the Constitution, new legislations, policies and strategies, (Muthoni, Ong’ang’a and Githui, 2021). One of them is the National Development Plan (NDP), Vision 2030 which demands a developmental and a capable state that comprises of great leadership and management capabilities, including better planning, monitoring and evaluation across government. To achieve this, the public sector needs to strengthen M&E practices by implementing key principles and approaches that will help improve performance. As suggested by the literature, monitoring and evaluation helps organizations to improve performance and achieve the desired results as per their long-term plans. The aim is to assess and measure the performance in order to obtain and better manage the outcomes, (Radebe 2014).

Research and method

Nayak and Singh (2015) view research methodology as a plan that specifies the guidelines and principles that should be adopted when doing research, as well as the practices that should be followed. They also assert that no one approved research technique is perfect and appropriate for all identified research problems, hence selecting a methodology always involves both gain and loss, meaning the researcher may or may not obtain the intended results. A qualitative research approach was employed using focus group discussions to solicit explicit information on how well the three district municipalities operate in terms of the application of monitoring and evaluation. Flick (2014) explain that qualitative research is interested in scrutinising the subjective meaning of issues and events by collecting non-standardised information, analysing text rather than numbers and statistics. It is concerned with many perspectives covering the interpretive techniques which seek to analyse, describe and translate the collected data into meaningful information related to the research subject, (Creswell and Creswell, 2017).

This type of research approach was suitable for the research study because of its concept of gaining in-depth information and explore perception of participants on matters relating to M&E in municipalities. A population was drawn from municipal employees working within the Performance management systems and corporate services divisions who understood and have vast knowledge of M&E and performance issues affecting the municipality. Moreover, they are experts in monitoring, reviewing and improving the execution of plans outlined in the municipal IDP and gauging progress made in achieving the municipal objectives. A total of 20 participants were selected through a purposive sampling technique which Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2016) describe as a judgement approach where the researcher makes a conscious decision based on characteristics the population of interest possesses. The researcher decides what information is necessary and selects individuals who are willing to supply it. As a result, participants were selected based on their knowledge and understanding of M&E and how it impacts the overall performance of the municipality, the M&E systems, challenges, and effects of M&E on service delivery.

Since this study is based on qualitative research, it required data that was rich and subtle, allowing themes and findings to emerge through rigorous analysis. The findings were analysed thematically using Nvivo software package to generate themes. According to (Kiger and Varpio, 2020) the term “thematic analysis” refers to a technique for analyzing qualitative data that involves classifying data into themes and using interpretation while selecting codes and developing themes. This approach to data analysis is an appropriate and suitable method as it seeks to understand people’s experiences, thoughts and behaviour across the collected data.

This study adhered to ethical principles and an ethical clearance letter was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of the Durban University of Technology (DUT). This letter guarantees that the proposed research complies with ethical standards and principles and provides the study with the authority to proceed. Through a gatekeeper letter, consent to conduct the study in the identified district municipalities obtained from Municipal Managers. The participants’ consent was obtained through the signing of a consent form that expressed their willingness to take part in the study, provided information about how anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy of the participants' information and identities were ensured, as well as their rights to voluntarily participate in the study and their ability to withdraw at any time during the data collection process.

Data presentation and interpretation

The study was aimed at analysing the effect of M&E and its contribution towards the performance of local government in uThukela, Amajuba and uMgungundlovu district municipality. Data was categorised, analysed and interpreted according to the following themes:

Table 1: Main themes

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<th>Main themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Theme 1: Analysing and understanding M &amp; E</td>
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<td>Theme 2: The effects of M&amp;E on the performance of local government</td>
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<td>Theme 3: M&amp;E models and systems utilised by municipalities</td>
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<td>Theme 4: Challenges associated with M&amp;E within the three district municipalities</td>
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<td>Theme 5: Contribution of M&amp;E towards performance and service delivery</td>
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<td>Theme 6: Possible M&amp;E alternatives/solutions</td>
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Table 1 depicts the main themes that emerged from the analysis of data obtained through the focus group discussions with municipal employees relating to the effects of M&E on the performance within the selected district municipalities.

**Analysing and understanding M&E within local government**

This theme sought to elicit feedback from the participants on their understanding and analysis of how M&E is undertaken in the local government sphere. The purpose was to gain the opinions and perspectives on what they already knew and understood about M&E and its significance in the operation of their specific municipality. According to participant responses, it can be assumed that most participants within the district municipalities have a fundamental understanding of the purpose of monitoring and evaluation. The participants posited that M&E plays a critical role in supporting performance management in all levels of government as it contributes to a thinking that is results oriented and also provides methodological options to support performance management. M&E plays a key role in informing the stakeholders of progress between the planned (committed) targets and actual results (which would be experienced as service delivery in terms of quantity and quality).

This feature helps to ensure high levels of productivity and performance, reduce risks, and report on the findings in order to achieve their operational and annual targets (Ochieng, Rambo and Osogo, 2018: 68).

“M&E involves the process of performance planning, monitoring, review of municipal activities, reporting on them, thus the level of performance is improved, organised and managed”. (Amajuba municipality, focus group discussion, 2022)

These findings are in line with Uwizeyimana (2020) that M&E is an ongoing activity that collects information on performance indicators of government activities to inform management of the institution’s effectiveness and productivity. It also gives the key stakeholders information and evidence of the success or failure of an ongoing development intervention or programme, allowing them to monitor how well the money provided are being used to advance goals and progress. In addition, the literature recognises M&E as an effective tool to address issues of non-performance and improve the quality of programmes and project planning. Furthermore, it provides useful evidence for policy and decision-making and the desire to provide management with guidance on determining which programme appears to have an impact (Nonyane, 2019).

**The effects of M&E on the performance of local government**

This theme explored the effects of M&E on the performance of municipalities. The level of performance of municipalities is as a result of the assessment of operations and functions, which is what M&E can contribute. M&E can improve the performance and effective delivery of services which will benefit the community at large. The assessments of operations and service delivery programmes can result in practical indication of areas that are in danger and needing urgent intervention, possible deviations in terms of budget allocations and any other potential risks. M&E can boost service delivery and performance of municipalities through producing a realistic indication of areas that need immediate action, and detect budgetary deviations and other potential dangers that can be obtained from reviews of operations and service delivery programmes.

“When we implement projects, an evaluation exercise helps us in determining the impact of the project or programme aimed at benefiting the public, and detect areas that need to be rectified during and after the implementation of the project. And also determine whether the intended results have been achieved or not”. (uThukela municipality, focus group discussion, 2022)

The above narrative is further reinforced by Kamau and Mohamed (2015) who state that M&E systems boost development by providing fast, accurate, and relevant information, allowing for better decision-making and therefore greater effect on the implementation of projects and programmes. Development interventions can be effectively monitored and evaluated through rigorous but cost-effective approaches to collecting and utilising quality data on programme performance, outcomes, and impact. M&E in the field of development supports the making of evidence-based decisions in the planning and implementation of initiatives and programmes through tracking, evaluating and reporting on progress.

**M&E models and systems utilised by municipalities**

Municipalities monitor and assess their operations and activities using various techniques, frameworks, and processes. The findings indicated that municipalities utilise different models and systems to monitor and evaluate their operations and service delivery programmes. This includes statistics and logistical frameworks, periodic surveys, external consultants, Service Delivery and Budget...
Implementation Plan (SDBIP) and reports. As per the findings, it can be concluded that there is no standardised system that is comprehensive for municipalities to monitor and evaluate their operations and service delivery. They apply different models and systems that are thought to be appropriate and effective for their operations. Therefore, a proper M&E system that is uniform and centred on M&E is necessary since local government is the area that is closest to people, communities, and the general public and are tasked with the responsibility to achieve quality service delivery.

Challenges associated with M&E within the three district municipalities

This theme identifies M&E challenges within the three district municipalities, and highlight some of the interventions that the municipalities adopt to mitigate these challenges. Nonyane (2019) is of the view that M&E has not been understood or embraced in the government sector. This is one of the main reasons why local government struggles to achieve successful service delivery and enhance performance. Participants from Amajuba municipality reported that the issue of municipal employees’ continued non-compliance with the systems, procedures and policies pertaining to M&E is noted, exacerbated by the lack of disciplinary action for non-compliance. Participants from the uMgungundlovu municipality added to the aforementioned by saying that the absence of a unit that only undertakes M&E responsibilities presents a challenge within the municipality as it struggles to successfully adopt and implement M&E practices. In support of the above assertions, the table below provides a statistical indication of the extent of challenges which hinder the successful implementation of M&E in the municipalities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>M&amp;E challenges within three district municipalities</th>
<th>A. Amajuba Municipality</th>
<th>B. uMgungundlovu Municipality</th>
<th>C. uThukela Municipality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>51.82%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>23.18%</td>
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Source: Data generated by NVivo

The narrative and statistical data presented above revealed that the underlying problems that are related to or pose challenges to M&E include lack of compliance and lack of punitive measures for those who do not comply, lack of reporting, the absence of a dedicated, fully functional M&E unit, the lack of financial resources to carry out M&E activities, and the lack of skilled and competent employees to carry out M&E duties. Moreover, there is no permanent municipal manager in Amajuba municipality who is an accounting officer and is entrusted with overall duties and functions of the municipality including M&E. This results in poor institutionalisation of M&E leading to the poor performance of municipalities. Table 5.6 shows that the Amajuba municipality has a challenges rate of 51.83% which indicates that it is the most affected by the challenges related to M&E, while uMgungundlovu is at 25% and uThukela at 23.18%.

Based on these findings, it is sufficient to establish that municipalities are impacted by the challenges that prevent them from successfully implementing and implementation of M&E. M&E is therefore not given priority, even though it is an essential task which assists municipalities to implement their development policies efficiently. The findings of Nyamambi (2021) concur that municipalities are grappling with challenges of effective and efficient service delivery and the root cause of these challenges is attributed to a weak or uncomprenhensive M&E system in municipalities. The quality-of-service delivery is therefore generally compromised.

Contributions of M&E towards performance and service delivery

This theme explores how M&E contributes towards improving municipal performance and effective service delivery and the link between M&E and performance. A critical point emerged from the findings that M&E is significant since it produces accurate data regarding progress on the state of development initiatives and challenges; communication of that information amongst relevant stakeholders is an important aspect of the work. Municipalities hold a constitutional mandate to render basic and essential services to communities within their area of jurisdiction. This policy expectation calls for municipalities to carry out a series of activities and development initiatives in an effort to guarantee that this mandate is fulfilled. In the process of making this a reality, oversight and assessment of these activities must be conducted through the development and of M&E systems and models to ascertain whether intended results are achieved, resources are used effectively, identify potential risks that might prevent successful service delivery, and analyse the impact of the implemented projects on the lives of the people.

Monitoring and evaluation contributes by ensuring that funds and budgets are adhered to and ensure that the projects that are planned are monitored and evaluated formally so that there is accountability. This ensures that the people on the ground, the community get the benefit of improved service delivery of the municipality. (Amajuba municipality, focus group discussion, 2022)

The growing demand for evidence-based service delivery and development requires effective and successful implementation of M&E as an oversight mechanism to enable municipalities to enhance their performance and achieve quality service delivery hence Mubangizi's (2019) assertion that, in accordance with the constitutional mandate, municipalities must deal with a variety of complex and difficult service delivery problems. M&E can make it possible for programmes and initiatives to be carried out more successfully and to have a significant influence on the targeted communities in order to ensure effective service delivery.
Possible M&E alternatives and solutions

Municipalities are under pressure to provide communities with high-quality services while also meeting their high expectations. Implementing service delivery plans and meeting the targets as described in the IDP shows the public and stakeholders whether the municipality is abiding by its constitutional obligations. Improvements in M&E of municipal operations and service delivery initiatives are thus necessary to improve performance. Adding to the above, participants suggested that management should continuously practice a culture of motivating staff members who achieve their performance targets exceptionally well. This is to keep staff motivated and productive, consequently leading to improved performance.

The findings indicate that municipal staff need to be capacitated and trained for M&E as it is part of their line of work, direct or indirectly.

Monitoring and evaluation can be improved in the municipality by constant regular training of municipal staff to capacitate them in understanding the key and strategic objectives of their roles and responsibilities which affect the wider community. Consequence management should be implemented. (Amajuba municipality, focus group discussion, 2022).

The findings also revealed that there is a need for an establishment of a designated unit responsible for M&E matters within municipalities either than the available PMS unit that focuses more on human resource performance than M&E. Qualified M&E practitioners must be employed, and resources allocated for M&E be fully operational and carry out all necessary M&E functions. There is also a need for a common policy framework guiding M&E and for punitive measures to be implemented on those who are not complying with the set guidelines. The above statements are in agreement with Nyamambi (2021) who states that to ensure service delivery, municipalities must build a complete M&E system that allows for ongoing monitoring of their performance and consider adequate institutionalisation of M&E in the municipality. An M&E system will allow a municipality to assess performance in terms of inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impact levels.

Discussion

The findings demonstrated that the realities of municipalities are a concern as it has been regularly reported that municipalities are constantly performing below expectations and this is attributed to a variety of barriers that hinder the achievement of municipal targets, including issues of resources, capacity, lack of skills and competencies and effective monitoring and evaluation. Kariuki and Reddy (2017) maintain that a culture of poor performance has developed over the years, and it has become the norm and regarded as a contributing factor to lack of service delivery within municipalities. To address these inconsistencies, the local government municipalities must establish and strengthen the M&E system as a critical development tool to facilitate policy development and efficient use of public funds. The findings are also consistent with Rossignoli, Coticchia and Mezzasalma (2015) who argue that municipalities require a sense of improved outcomes and impact on their development initiatives in communities. This can be provided by an ongoing and consistent use of M&E to provide feedback on progress towards the attainment of planned goals and objectives.

The narrative of participants further established that since municipalities have the responsibility for delivering basic services in a variety of domains such as healthcare, education, infrastructure development, and social development, their operational processes and procedures are typically complex and necessitate careful attention. Nonetheless, errors and mistakes may also occur through the execution of development initiatives. As a result, M&E can raise an alarm or display a warning sign if an area requires immediate attention or when potential risks are discovered. This is evident in situations of budget deviations (where approved municipal budget allocations are spent in a manner that differs from what was approved). Such early warning means that the required corrective steps can be taken timeously. The study revealed that the adoption and application of M&E can provide the information that is required for stakeholders to maintain track of project development and overall municipal performance as also argued by Dipela and Mohapi (2021).

The M&E process results in generating reports that are presented to the municipal council, relevant management committees, stakeholders, and the general public. This enables management to make informed decisions about the success and failure of the project based on the evidence provided by M&E reports. This concurs with the view of Uwizeyimana (2020) that M&E is an ongoing activity that collects information on performance indicators of government activities to inform management of the institution’s effectiveness and productivity. It also gives the key stakeholders information and evidence of the success or failure of an ongoing development intervention or program, allowing them to monitor how well the money provided are being used to advance goals and progress.

Moreover, another element emerged that M&E is a complicated process with a range of constraints that can lead to poor alignment of M&E with policy planning and budgeting. One of the most prominent constraints is a lack of resources. The government has insufficient resources, which makes it difficult to execute M&E properly. This includes insufficient financial resources for the government to carry out its M&E tasks. Furthermore, there is a shortage of experienced and competent M&E practitioners, which contributes to a lack of knowledge of M&E and its relevance in government responsibilities, particularly in municipalities. Ndeve and Muller (2017) expand on this narrative that as seen by the high number of protest action, the state of distress in South African municipalities is growing as a result of significant discrepancies in service delivery, which has decreased public confidence in the
local government system. Amongst many, municipal service delivery challenges, such as a lack of resources and capacity, poor management of the resources are continuously observed in municipalities.

Arguably, there is a widespread misconception in the South African public sector that M&E is a compliance exercise that is only used to keep track of individuals who perform their duties and those who do not, whereas M&E exists as a system to assist the government in assessing the progress of their development programmes and reporting on it accordingly. As a result, this promotes ignorance of the fact that, above all else, M&E needs to be institutionalised and enforced for government to understand that it is an enabling mechanism that generates evidence demonstrating the success or failure of programmes and aids municipalities in achieving their program objectives. Scholars also noticed an insufficient utilisation of technology infrastructure that does not support M&E operations in the public sector, resulting in poor data quality. According to Dipela and Mohapi, (2021) for monitoring and evaluation to be effective, emphasis must be integrated to municipal planning and creating a set of actions that will support the M&E activities and the outcomes that follow from them.

Conclusions

The research findings indicate that it is crucial to evaluate the effectiveness of service delivery initiatives and programs implemented by municipalities in order to determine their success in achieving the desired outcomes for local communities. The improvement in performance is accomplished by means of the successful application of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices. The municipality is required to establish a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system that enables authorities to assess the effectiveness of its operations, gauge its performance, and identify any obstacles that could hinder the successful execution of development programs. Monitoring has a significant influence on the execution of municipal operations and development initiatives due to its ability to provide an indication of task achievement status. Therefore, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems and processes play a crucial role in conducting continuous evaluations and reviews to determine the extent to which activities are adhering to the planned course, remaining within the designated budget, and achieving the project results as defined in the Integrated Development Plan (IDP). The utilization of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices within municipalities facilitates the implementation of development initiatives, programs, and projects in a manner that is organized, trustworthy, and pertinent. This, in turn, contributes to the attainment of operational excellence, enhanced productivity, and improved overall performance.

Recommendations

In conclusion, the study suggests that municipalities should embrace and execute monitoring and evaluation (M&E) as a strategic strategy and operational practice in order to effectively operate and deliver high-quality services. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) has the potential to enhance the performance of local government communities and alleviate the administrative load on municipalities by facilitating the efficient, effective, and economical fulfillment of their commitments. The existing body of literature highlights the importance of implementing a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system in order to enhance government performance and service delivery. This system should facilitate the improvement of governance within departments and entities, while also establishing clear intervention objectives and impacts. By doing so, the government can effectively address the needs and demands of its citizens. Government structures and institutions are influenced by legislation and policies, which serve as a basis for efficient management. Consequently, this study proposes the creation and establishment of policies that specifically target monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices within the uThukela, Amajuba, and uMngungundlovu municipalities. These policies should consider the unique characteristics and operational dynamics of the municipalities, encompassing their overall functions and administrative operations. The policies should encompass principles, guidelines, and standards related to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in order to enhance understanding of M&E and its implementation. These policies should also outline the roles and responsibilities of municipal staff members and other stakeholders, while integrating the principles and guidelines outlined in existing policies, such as the Municipal Systems Act. Additional research might be undertaken to examine the extent to which other levels of government and stakeholders are able to effectively address concerns of underperformance within local government.

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