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INTERROGATING MAYORAL LEADERSHIP AND POLITICAL ARRANGEMENTS REQUIRED FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT TURNAROUND IN MPUMANLANGA PROVINCE: A RESEARCH CONCEPTUALISATION

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ABSTRACT

Service delivery in several South African municipalities is poor. There are a variety of systemic challenges that contribute to poor service delivery outcomes in local governments. Unfortunately, most Mayors (Executive or otherwise) in Mpumalanga Province are struggling to effectively turnaround the performance of their local government (district municipality and local municipality). Past and current studies are not conclusive on whether mayors discharge their oversight and accountability responsibilities in line with the Constitution. Oversight challenges include poor performance, negative audit outcomes and the widening gap between the executive and Councillors. Ultimately, this study seeks to interrogate the extent to which mayors use transformational leadership to effectively execute oversight for municipal turnaround in Mpumalanga Province. However, this is a theoretical article whose aim is merely conceptualising this research. We employ a systems thinking approach to interrogating the literature on the (i.) research physical context or setting (Mpumalanga Province), (ii.) the research problem analysis, and (iii.) the research knowledge gap. More specifically, we employ a summative thematic content analysis as well as the problem tree, trend analysis, and the theory of constraint to interrogate this research problem and its dynamics. Based on the knowledge we garner here, we end up with proposing a suitable problem statement, research purpose statement, research questions (and accompanying research hypotheses) as well as a befitting research strategy, design, procedure and methods.

Keywords: Leadership, Mayor performance, Research conceptualisation, Research context analysis, Research problem analysis, Research knowledge gap, Service delivery, Turnaround strategy



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1. INTRODUCTION

From the outset, we need to state that this is theoretical article whose aim is to merely conceptualising research on mayoral leadership and political arrange-

ments required for local government turnaround in Mpumalanga. Therefore, we have not fully developed its conceptual framework or its empirical part. As such, its research strategy, design, procedure and methods are also amiss. In conceptualising this research, we learn that despite promulgation of enabling policy and legislative frameworks such as the Municipal Structure Act 117 of 1998 or Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 the performance of local governments is below expectations (Masiya, 2021; Oupa, 2023). Unfortunately, most Mayors in Mpumalanga Province are struggling to effectively turnaround the performance of their local governments poor service delivery, poor audit outcomes, and financial viability. There has always been a disjuncture between mayoral leadership and institutional performance in local government (Avellaneda, 2009). Along with the constrained capabilities of mayors, these predicaments retard functionality and performance of local government (Kouba and Dosek 2023). Some studies, such as Salvador and Pano (2018) noted the inhibitive nature of the current mayoral leadership model in addressing critical performance predicaments confronting local government. They argue that any effort to revive municipal performance is contingent upon the model of local government adopted and its role advancing reforms and innovation to improve service delivery outcomes.

Performance management has been conceptualised by Armstrong and Taylor (2020) as a developmental and evolving process aimed at institution-wide performance improvement within an agreed framework of goals, standards and competence frameworks. The Municipal Structure Act 117 of 1998 or Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 places a greater responsibility on the senior leadership and management to use performance management to improve not just service delivery but also accountability and transparency in the manner in which services are discharged to citizens (Schoeman and Chakwizira, 2023). However, despite growing scholarly evidence on service delivery and local government turnaround, it could be that little has been systematically documented about implementation of performance management in South African local governments (Manyaka and Sebola, 2015); raising further questions about the oversight role of mayors in these institutions. We do concur with the growing body of research that effective leadership has a profound positive impact of the future direction of the organisation (Rahman, Sahar, Putra and Diliawan, 2018; Atiku, Kurana and Ganiyu, 2023).

In the absence of detailed empirical accounts of reputable mayoral leadership styles, we argue that transformational leadership has a potential to facilitate local government turnaround through effective style of leadership, ethical conduct and change management, effective stakeholder engagement and collaborative approaches and a fair possession of required competencies to manage service delivery (Isaacs, 2016; Tshishonga, 2018; Mamokhere, Mabunda and Chauke, 2024). We argue that local governments occupy a strategic role in the government's vision for creating and sustaining an effective local government system capable of delivering the key strategic objec-

tive of a developmental state (Maphumulo and Bhengu, 2019). The political leadership is central to mobilising and uniting communities and other stakeholders for local government turnaround (Rapoport, Acuto, and Sweitzer, 2015). However, the efficacy of the political leadership in local governments is being challenged in the wake of nation-wide protests over deteriorating service standards and adverse media reports (Taaibosch and Van Niekerk, 2017).

Leadership deficiency contributes to corruption and negative audit outcomes in local governments (Auditor-General Report, 2020-2021; Mamokhere, Mabunda and Chauke, 2024). Translating local government turnaround plans into tangible service delivery outcomes requires ethical and change-oriented leadership (Masiya et al 2021). In response to these knowledge deficits, we advance two strands of knowledge that are central to revitalising and strengthening mayoral governance in developing countries, namely reconceptualising the mayoral leadership model to enhance institutional responsiveness to citizens' development needs. The second strand of knowledge encompasses rethinking of the current political arrangements to enhance compatibility between mayoral leadership and local government institutional design.

Increased devolution of authority and power, roles and responsibilities as well as decision making to both state and non-state actors increase the complexity of the local government political system, thus placing the mayoral leadership on the spotlight in terms of leadership capabilities and competences. To cope with these complexities, local governments require leadership that is capable of integrating organisational efforts with the conflicting and counterproductive expectations of politicians, citizens, employees, media and stakeholders in order to create public value (Raisiene and Arimaviciute, 2017). Not only do these challenges demand strong transformational capabilities but also require social mobilisation skills to build social capital and reciprocal networks necessary to improve delivery of public goods and services in local governments (Barber, 2013 and Karsten & Hendriks, 2016). Critically, Harkness, Katz, Conroy and Tilchin (2016) emphasise that the complexity of urban governance warrants a paradigm shift from traditional models of mayoral leadership that portray mayors as ceremonial and oversight figures in the realm of local government to more broad-based and change-oriented mayoral leadership approaches that can facilitate local government turnaround.

In general, this article employs a summative thematic content analysis to interrogate literature. More specifically, we describe Mpumalanga Province which is our research physical context or setting or location, we employ a systems thinking approach to undertake a research problem analysis. More specifically, we loop in the problem tree, the theory of constraint, and some trend analysis to interrogate our research problem and its dynamics. Having understood our problem, then we review similar past and present research to undertake a research knowledge gap analysis. Based on the knowl-

edge we garnered, we then propose a befitting research conceptualisation.

2. THE HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION OF THE MPUMALANGA PROVINCE LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

For our study, the local government in Mpumalanga Province as defined by Wotela (2019:520) is "*the physical research context or setting where the research will take place*". The province derives its mandate from Chapter 7 and Section 152 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) which envisions a democratic, developmental, cooperative, and accountable local government that is responsive to the needs of local communities (Madumo, 2015). To give effect to these provisions, the national government subsequently promulgated a series of legislation, including: the Municipal Demarcation Board Act (1998) which facilitated reconfiguration of municipal boundaries; the Local Government White Paper (1998) which sets out a policy trajectory for local governance; and the Municipal Structures Act (1998) which institutionalised the structuring of local governments. In addition, the Municipal Systems Act (32 of 2000) empowers local government to package and sustainably deliver basic services to local communities, promote local economic development and ensure safe and healthy living environments while encouraging the involvement and participation of local communities in developmental activities (De Visser, 2009). Meeting these development imperatives requires adequate transformation capacity to prepare local government leadership intellectually, politically, and professionally to ensure that a high standard of performance is maintained in the local sphere of government (Koma, 2012).

Mpumalanga province is located on the eastern side of South Africa; bordered by Swaziland and Mozambique (https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-Southern-Africa-with-the-nine-provinces-of-South-Africa-1-9-Source_fig1_327770497), while this link (https://municipalities.co.za/provinces/view/6/mpumalanga) gives a breakdown of the district municipalities found in the province The provincial context is extremely important as it manifests some of the key challenges that local governments face in scaling up and improving delivery of basic services (Mapitsa and Landau, 2019). A common challenge across local governments in South Africa's nine provinces has been the limited leadership capacity and weakening ethical leadership value systems (Mbandlwa, Dorosamy and Fagbadebo, 2020: 1642). The White Paper on Local Government (1998) describes local government system as vehicle committed to working with communities and other stakeholders to create sustainable human settlements that enhance quality of life and provide for their needs holistically. Binza (2010: 242) defines local government as "*that sphere of government which is close to the people and where people are inclusive in its processes of governance, service delivery and sustainable socio-economic development*".

It should empower the local authorities within the law, to regulate and man-

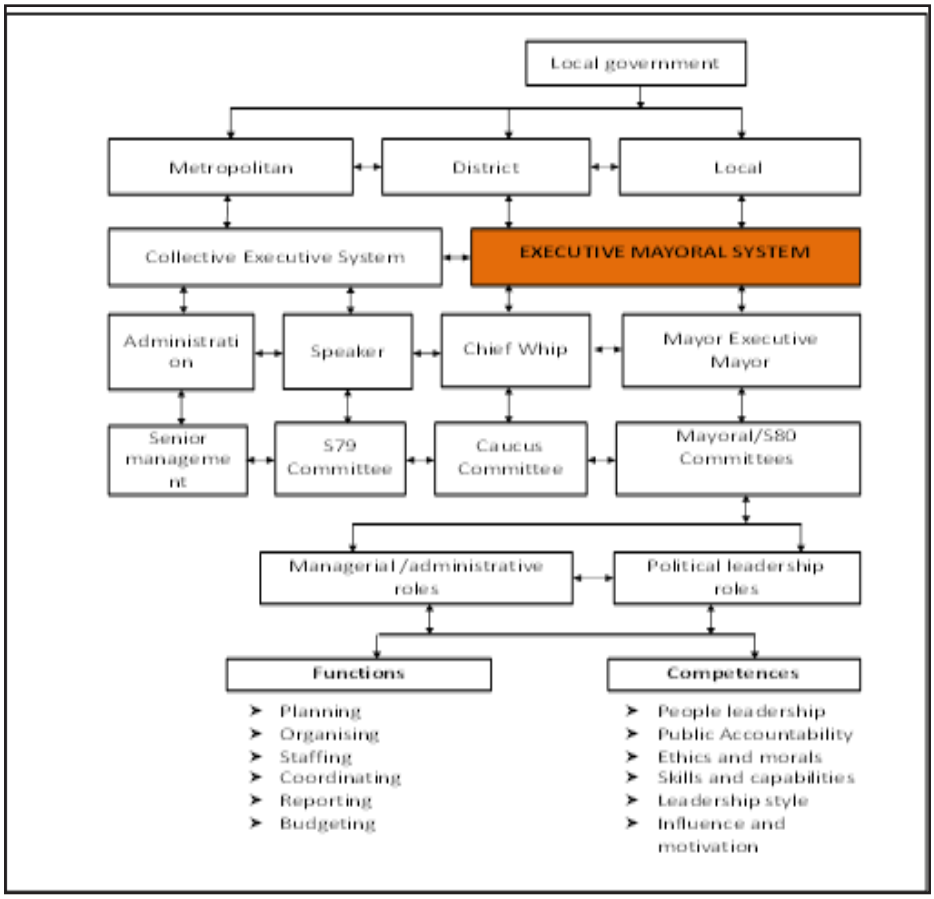
age public affairs and in the interests of communities under its jurisdiction (European Charter on Local Self-Government, 1985). This means that local government embraces policy priorities that are derived from direct participation by local people. As a political system, local government is a product of decentralisation that is intended to devolve public responsibilities from centralised government systems to a localised governing body or institutions, giving local people direct influence on the functions and control of such a delivery body or institution (Ndou and Sebola, 2016). However, realising these imperatives depends on the nature and type of leadership style— such as transformational leadership—adopted by the senior leadership in the municipality.

Figure 1: depicts the local government system in Mpumalanga Province, including the executive mayoral system responsible for oversight in local government turnaround. In general, the specific features that differentiate local government from other organs of state are: decentralised decision-making processes; community participation; integrated planning processes; locality and close proximity to local communities (Haque, 2012). The Figure also depicts the general functions and competences of the leadership; which are also critical in the implementation of oversight role and responsibility on local government turnaround strategies. Another distinguishing feature of local government is that the Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) accords exclusive powers and functions to local governments, such as taking full responsibility for local development (De Visser, 2009). These dynamics increases complexity of the local government for a successful and effective turnaround; requiring strategic, flexible, adaptable and inclusive forms of leadership.

Scholars such as Brynson (2016) argue that leadership deficiencies affect the quality of policy outcomes and the level of satisfaction among citizens. The efficiency of public administration hinges primarily on the quality of human capital and skills levels, which need ongoing modernisation and improvement to enhance service delivery outcomes (Mehlape, 2017). Cloete (2016: 2) argues that "*the prevalent culture in many local governments is not conducive to attracting and retaining the skilled and professional staff required to ensure effective service delivery.*" Financial management is concerned with prudent fiscal management to ensure that state institutions meet their constitutional mandates in terms of service delivery, accountability, transparency, and clean governance (Sibanda, 2017; Adekoya, 2020). Theletsane (2019) argues that although mayors officially occupy powerful political positions within the municipal administration system, scholarly focus has always been on municipal managers rather than mayors and as a result, little information exist to explain the oversight role of mayors in leading and facilitating performance improvements in local government.

Extant empirical studies examine mayoral leadership in terms of their multiple roles, including chief executive, chief legislator, party leader, ceremonial figure, and political leader (Farrar, 2011 cited in Louw, 2019).

Figure 1: The local government system



Source: Authors(2024)

With respect to scholarly gaps in transformational leadership, Asmal (2019) notes that across the African continent, there are limitations in the practice of transformation leadership practices, as evidenced by inadequate mechanisms for public participation, leaders who are out of touch with the community needs and values (Ndevu and Muller, 2018); and absence of effective strategies to weed out corruption. Asmal (2019) stresses the fact that adoption and institutionalisation of transformational leadership style and practices is central to improving the responsiveness of the public service to citizens' needs. Avellaneda (2018) asserts that effective mayoral leadership and skilled human capital positively influence organisational performance. The Mpumalanga Spatial Development Framework

(2018) notes that rural communities in this region face severe challenges in terms of poverty, inequality, limited access to basic services and social infrastructure, underdevelopment and slow economic growth partly due to inconsistent old apartheid spatial patterns. Tackling these challenges require adaptive and capable leadership at all levels of the local government system in order to affect a responsive turnaround (Sibanda, 2017). In exploring these issues, we establish whether mayors have the capabilities and ethical competence to deal with strategic performance improvement. With intensification of service delivery protests and consistently negative audit outcomes, concerns have been raised about future sustainability of local government in South Africa (Kroukamp, 2016).

Specifically, Mpumalanga Province has a population of 4 743 584 (Statistics South Africa, 2021), having increased from 4 million in 2011 to 4.5 million in 2016 (Statistics South Africa, 2018). Its local government system comprises three district municipalities—namely, Gert Sibande (with 7 local municipalities), Nkangala (with 6 local municipalities), and Ehlanzeni (with 4 local municipalities). Like all local governments around the country, the Mpumalanga local government system faces opportunities and constraints culturally, politically, economically, socially, and environmentally. Of these three district municipalities, our study focuses on Ehlanzeni. Like all district municipalities, Ehlanzeni faces formidable challenges in vacant management positions poverty, unemployment and service delivery backlogs (Reddy, 2016 and Magagula, Mukonza, Manyaka and Moeti, 2022). There is limited research on the type of political leadership styles and practices required to implement a local government turnaround strategy. As argued by Dollery and Johnson (2005), there is also limited research that demonstrates the applicability of transformational leadership theory to foster human capital development at the level of mayors.

Taking this into consideration, this study seeks to establish why mayors are increasingly finding it difficult to improve performance in their local governments. Our fundamental premise is that while the constitution assigns clear developmental responsibilities to local governments, including consultative planning, legislative powers and budgeting processes, however, these have not translated into tangible results for poor and marginalised households (Maziwisa and De Visser, 2021). In the next section, we undertake problem analysis to identify the root causes of underperformance and stagnation in local governments, with particular focus on the case study.

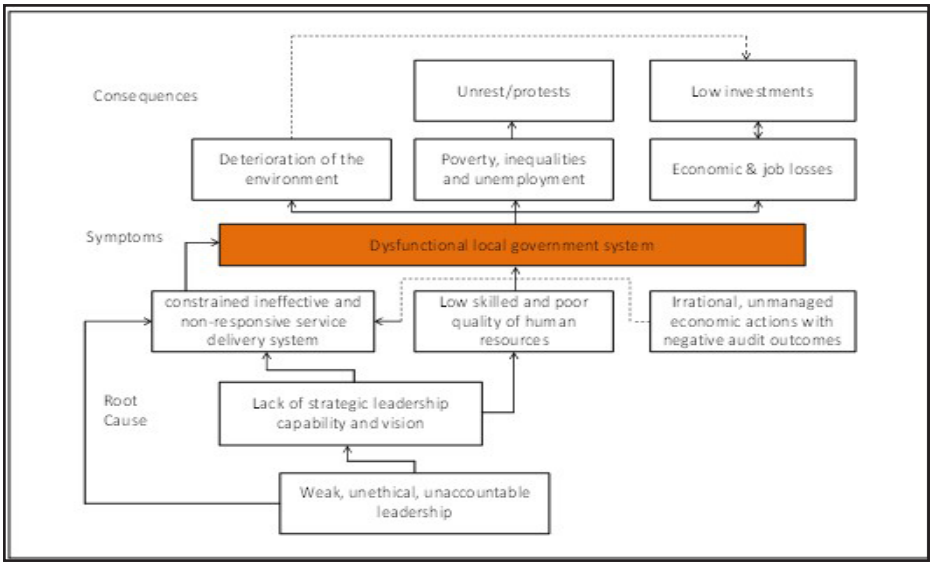
3. LEADERSHIP ARRANGEMENTS OF SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Wotela (2019:521) describes research problem analysis as "using literature, academic or otherwise to show that a research problem of interest exists and then pointing out its dynamics." Deploying a theory of constraints (Balderstone and

Mabin (2003), we interrogate the mayoral leadership constraints that prevent mayors from reviving performance in their local governments. In analysing and unpacking the root causes of underperformance in local governments, we consider that "expediency for the creation of local government stems from the need to facilitate development at grassroots. Leadership ineffectiveness has contributed to declining performance standards in the local government system" (Abdullahi and Chikaji, 2017:2). Our analysis is consistent with the growing body of research which shows that although South Africa's transition to democracy has been realised, however, this has not been accompanied by corresponding improvements in the cadre of leadership needed to lead change in local governments (Naidoo and Jackson, 2009). Guided by these assumptions, we proceed to present the root causes of poor performance in Figure 3.

First of all, the core mandate of local government is set out in Sections 151 and 152 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. Specifically, Section 152 states that the objects of local government are (a) to provide democratic and accountable government for local communities; (b) to ensure the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner; (c) to promote social and economic development; (d) to promote safe and healthy environment; and (e) to encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in the matters of local government. Clearly, these provisions set the tone for a transformative, focused and collaborative leadership required to turnaround local government performance.

Figure 2: Root causes of poor performance in local governments



In addition, the Municipal Systems Act (2000) empowers local government to package and sustainably deliver sustainable basic services to local communities, promote local economic development and ensure safe and healthy living environments while encouraging the involvement and participation of local communities in development activities (De Visser, 2009). Meeting these development imperatives requires adequate transformational capacity to prepare local government leadership intellectually, politically, and professionally to ensure that a high standard of performance is maintained in the local sphere of government (Koma, 2012). Studies have shown that the current mayoral leadership models such as the strong mayor-weak mayor model; authoritative mayor model, and facilitative mayor model have not been able to provide plausible accounts of the widespread leadership inefficiencies experienced in local government, especially in developing countries such as South Africa and in Mpumalanga Province specifically (Tshishonga, 2018). Weissman (1985:323) concur with the above statement by noting that "*poorly designed accountability systems lead to redistribution of rewards which overtime led to less effective service and curvilinear relationship between service effectiveness and accountability*."

Technically, the current mayoral leadership, as a political arrangement model, does not compel or hold mayors to account directly to communities at grassroot level. Rather, it prioritises political party loyalty over community accountability. Consequently, accountability relationships between the mayor and communities are reduced to symbolic interactions, with little impact on local government to promote effective turnaround outcomes (Van der Waldt, 2015). Weak accountability relationships precipitate poor performance and dysfunctionality of local governments (Pillay, 2016). Considering these predicaments, we argue that limited transformational capabilities of mayors deprive many local governments of the opportunity to transform themselves, improve delivery capacity and grow their revenue base, which is critical for sustainable, high quality service delivery (Chitimira, Sethunyane and Magau, 2023). It is notable that one of the root causes of underperformance is perennial skills backlogs at the senior leadership level. Studies show that skills transfer averaged 47 per cent in 2013 and 61 per cent in 2011-12. Lack of skills hurts service delivery (Ramutsheli and van Rensburg, 2015). Ineffective leadership is ultimately the key problem (Francis (2013). Other researchers have noted the destabilising effect of weak oversight on municipal performance as it exacerbates corruption and fruitless and wasteful expenditure (AGSA, 2013a; 2014; 2015). Along with lack of transformational leadership approaches, these predicaments make it virtually impossible for mayors to turn around the performance of their local governments.

Considering these predicaments, we concur with Weissman (1985) view that pseudo-accountability limits the ability of the political leadership to account directly to their communities (Weissman, 1985). As indicated in the problem tree above, the symptoms of local government failures are linked to weak, unethical

and unaccountable leadership. What compounds the problem is the paucity of robust and comprehensive research on the oversight role of mayors (Gailmard, 2010). It is in this context that we conceptualise a qualitative study to determine why mayors struggle to turnaround performance in their local municipalities in Ehlanzeni district. Following is a brief outline of some of the consequences of underperformance in local governments. Nearly all the studies reviewed validate our assertion that the current mayoral leadership is unable to help local governments turn their performance around. We concur with arguments in the literature that this had led to dysfunctional local governments (Cameron and Milne, 2011; Siddle and Koelble, 2016); ccorruption and wasteful expenditure (Skenjana, 2019); poor performance, negative outcomes (Shai, 2017, Masiya, Davids and Mangal, 2021); sservice delivery protests (Naidoo, 2016); loss of critical leadership talent and skills (Tshefu, 2014; Mapitsa and Landau, 2019) and weakening oversight and accountability (Ngcobo and Mdani, 2015; Sibanda, 2017) and distressed local governments (Auditor-General Report, 2020/2021).

Our view is compatible with Kader and Ullah's (2020) research which noted that leadership effectiveness in local government is undermined by paucity of resources, lack of accountability, corruption and limited skills and monitoring capacities. These predicaments make it virtually impossible for mayors to turn around the performance of their local governments. The centrality of our argument is that mayors have a vital role to play in development and local government's relations with citizens and marginalised groups in society (Hoole, 2018). Local government leadership must be healthy and functional and should be led by competent individuals (Laubscher, 2012 and Mofolo, 2020). High vacancy rates at senior management level precipitates accountability problems as municipal managers are designated accounting officers (Kaywood, 2021).

We argue that mayors are not subjected to competency audits to determine if they have suitable leadership attributes and capabilities to lead local government turnaround efforts, resulting in more systemic failures (Ngqwala and Ballard, 2020; Mbandlwa, Dorasamy and Fagbadebo, 2020). In our view, these predicaments raise questions as to whether mayoral leadership in local governments has been adequately capacitated with transformational leadership capabilities to be able to able to lead change and perform its oversight role in local government turnaround strategies. We concur with Sinining's (2017) contention that despite proliferation of leadership development models in both developed and developing states, however, none of these interventions have produced the calibre of leaders needed to improve performance and change management outcomes in organisations.

We further argue that inclusive and consultative leadership not only advance structural improvements but also create empowering conditions by defining visions, fostering culture change and en-

abling people to collectively implement policies (Puatu, 2010).

4. METHODS, DATA, FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS OF STUDIES ON AND EVALUATION OF LEADERSHIP AND POLITICAL ARRANGEMENTS REQUIRED FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT TURNAROUND

Leadership has been examined from different perspectives with contradictory conceptualisations and interpretations (Mango, 2018; Vince and Pedler, 2018; Malik, and Azmat, 2019; Schweiger, Muller and Guttel, 2020). Most of the studies reviewed examine leadership from a service delivery and governance perspective (Reddy, 2016; Masiya, 2021; Mamokhere, 2022). Trottier, Van Wart and Wang (2008) argue that *"though the mainstream organizational literature has advanced in the last 20 years with the integration of transformational and distributed leadership theories, as well as genuine attempts at comprehensive models, the public sector literature has lagged, especially in utilizing large-scale empirical studies to analyse transformational leadership practices in these organisations."*

Research looking into personal attributes that influence transformational leadership as an outcome is limited, especially in mayors (Mencl, Wefald and Van Ittersum, 2016). There is still a need to investigate the link between transformational leadership other key variables that affect organisational performance in the public sector (Ledimo, 2014). Research on the strategic role of political leadership in local government is limited and rudimentary (Brynstorn, 2016). Research on oversight and accountability role of mayors in local government turnaround strategies is limited and inconclusive (Brynstorn, 2016). Consequently, the relationship between transformational leadership and mayors has not been fully investigated (Ledimo, 2014; Mencl, Wefald and Van Ittersum, 2016).

Rapoport, Acuto, and Sweitzer (2015) characterises mayoral leadership as a catalytic process bringing together multiple elements of urban governance to identify issues and priorities and implement action. The local government system of election is a mixed system of both proportional representation (PR) and a constituency based direct representation, or the ward based system. Election of mayors is determined by political affiliation rather than leadership competency and capabilities (Nzama and Sebola, 2021). This system creates both a possibility of indirect and direct representation. Mayors are nominated and indirectly elected from a PR side of the system that creates a model of party nomination and election of mayors.

Our contestation is that this model is inherently distorted in that the favourite candidate elected as executive mayor is often not pre-screened for leadership style, ethical competences, leadership accountability as well as organizational suitability and capability. This leads to contributions to systemic failures as a result of critical inadequacies brought about by disjuncture with leadership requirements (Ngqwala and Ballard, 2020; Mbandlwa, Dorasamy, and

Fagbadebo, 2020). The extent of the lack of transformational leadership to enable turnaround towards a developmental local government has been a recurring deficiency that precipitates dysfunctionality of some local governments. The failures in local government a partly attributed to the lack of appropriate leadership with requisite transformational leadership style, ethics, responsiveness and lack of accountability and capabilities to lead dynamic and complex organisations such as local governments (Mamokhere, Mabunda, and Chauke, 2024). Whilst the model is legislated and contains mixed elements of direct and indirect representation, it somehow fails to produce strong, coherent and balanced calibre of leadership in a Municipal environment.

One of the key limitations of the current mayoral leadership model is that the Executive Mayor is a political party choice and not a people's choice. Executive Mayor accounts to the political party that nominated them and basically not the people they serve; resulting in pseudo-accountability relationships that inhibit service delivery. Weissman (1985) observed that pseudo-accountability severely limits the ability of elected political leaders to account directly to their communities. This is exacerbated by the fact that high quality level of leadership is concentrated at Provincial and national levels. Little to none is left for local governments. Along with the several vacancies in senior management positions, this creates additional accountability challenges as municipal managers are designated accounting officers in terms of the Municipal Finance Management Act 56 of 2003 (Kaywood, 2021). Hoole (2018) notes that mayors have considerable importance both in city development and local government's relations with citizens and marginalised groups in society and most importantly, in piloting institutionalised change than can address the needs of the poor.

Laubscher (2012) and Mofolo (2020) emphasise that local government leadership must be healthy and functional and should be led by competent individuals. However, as shown in Table 1, current research yields inconclusive accounts of the leadership styles, capabilities and ethical competence required to turn around performance in local government (Lee, 2017; Miao, 2017). Considering these knowledge gaps, we argue that responsive mayoral governance systems are critical in developing countries where local government face multiple systemic challenges in city development and service provision. The current mayoral leadership model yields pseudo-accountability where the mayor accounts directly to the incumbent political party rather than communities (Weissman, 1985). Systemic performance challenges call for revitalisation of leadership capabilities and ethical competence in local governments (Matei and Matei, 2009 and Mbandlwa, Dorosamy and Fagbadebo, 2020: 1642).

The current mayoral leadership model is unable to produce the calibre of senior leaders required for local government turnaround. In our view, this is the missing link in the current mayoral leadership model (Becerra, 2007 and Hambleton et al 2022).

Table 1: Knowledge gaps in current research

Author	Focus /argument	Knowledge gaps	Response
Havenga, Mehana and Visagie (2011)	Leadership development and sustainable quality service delivery	Examines public leadership from a service delivery perspective rather than transformational leadership	Transformational leadership perspective
Sancino, Carli and Giacomini (2022);	Engagement between mayors , managers and citizens and stakeholders	Focuses mainly on relational leadership rather than transformational leadership and accountability	Principal-agent perspective to improve oversight implementation
Ndlovu (2016)	Strategic leadership approach to service delivery	Examines leadership from a service delivery perspective; his analysis excludes mayors	Transformational leadership as a catalyst for change
Theletsane (2013)	Corruption in municipalities highlights leadership crisis	Looks at leadership from a governance perspective and ethics, which is relevant to the present study	Ethical leadership perspective
Taaibosch and Van Niekerk (2017)	Councilors are not sufficiently capacitated, which leads to poor service delivery	Investigates municipal leadership from a capacity building perspective but excludes mayors	Competency-based leadership perspective

source: Authors (2024)

One of the overriding questions in this article, therefore, is: to what extent is the mayoral governance system responsive to the needs of local communities? Is the mayoral governance system, as contemplated in legislation, still capable of turning around performance in ailing local governments? How well does the current local government institutional design and political arrangements facilitate mayoral leadership effectiveness? Clearly, these questions warrant rethinking and re-conceptualisation of mayoral leadership to facilitate social transformation and performance improvement in local government turnaround interventions; especially in developing contexts.

5. TOWARDS INTERROGATING LEADERSHIP AND POLITICAL ARRANGEMENTS REQUIRED FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT TURNAROUND

Recall that the aim of this article is to conceptualise this research, and this is why the section comes last rather than first. "*Research conceptualisation comprises turning a research idea into a researchable process that should in turn end up in a research report …*" (Wotela, 2019: 515). Ideally, a solid research conceptualisation follows on interrogating literature on the research problem in context, as well as the knowledge gap. Our interrogation points to dysfunctionality and underperformance in local government. How then should we conceptualise such as research. In Section that follow we present the research problem statement and the accompanying research purpose statement as well as the appropriate research questions. We also proposed in the absence of the complete conceptual framework, a research strategy, design, procedure and methods as well as an accompanying interpretive framework in that we should consider for this research that we will detail in subsequent papers.

5.1 Research problem statement

The South African Government has been battling the deteriorating ability of local governments to deliver quality services, improve collection of revenue, and to restore proper accountability and community trust (Makanyeza, 2012; Reddy, 2016). The State of Local Government Reports (2009, 2020, 2021) raised numerous systemic challenges that negatively affected the credibility of local governments and recommended remedial actions focusing on strategic turnaround. While the executive mayor model may have delivered visible leadership, direct accountability and efficiency, however, it has also delivered many mayors who are at odds with their caucus, retreat into the municipal administration and remain disconnected with their base (De Visser, 2018: 12).

There are concerns that executive mayoral committees are becoming a law unto themselves. This is reflected in the gaps that are developing between mayoral committee members and ordinary councillors (Cameron and Milne, 2011). A key challenge is the inability of the political leadership to sanction the prevalent

non-compliant behaviour of municipal officials (Gailmard, 2012). Studies reveal a recurring mismatch between performance management and financial reporting systems, which struggle to provide timely information necessary to assess accountability in local governments (Cohen, Rossi, Caperchione and Brusca, 2018). Along with widespread service delivery protests and non-compliance by political leaders and administrators, these predicaments are illustrative of the dysfunctional nature of municipalities in South Africa (Atkinson, 2007 Tapscott, 2008).

These revelations are consistent with observations in literature that the local government system in South Africa faces challenges in advancing ethical, participative and responsive leadership needed to revive and stabilise performance in local governments (Ndletyana and Muzondidya, 2009; Mbandlwa, Dorosamy, and Fagbadebo, 2020). The oversight role of mayors is paramount in realising an inclusive, efficient, and high performing local government system. Some of these impediments are liked to inhibitive and inflexible nature of the political arrangements that characterise most local government systems; which often lack unified bureaucratic and reporting systems, capacity and resources (Yusuph and Guohua, 2017). Given these knowledge gaps in current conceptualisations of local government leadership, we contend that the real challenge in local governments is the advancement of a strong leadership framework that embraces the collective nature of public leadership (Bvuma, 2014, Brookes, 2008 and Sinha, 2012. Our conceptualisation of mayoral leadership is consistent with the notion of developmental leadership advanced by Leftwich and Hogg (2008) "developmental leadership is an inherently political process involving the organisation and mobilisation of people, informal coalitions of interests, elites, organisations and resources in pursuit of particular goals in a given institutional contexts of authority, legitimacy and power. Post-traditional conceptualisations of leadership advance terms such as shared leadership or servant leadership connotes the increasingly collaborative and inclusive nature of contemporary leadership approaches required to lead change in complex organisations such as local governments (Bvuma, 2014). In part, the impetus for this article stems from the notion that the concept of leadership is multi-faceted, controversial and lacks integrated theoretical framework (Hackman and Wageman, 2007 and James and Collins, 2008).

5.2 Research purpose statement

Grounded in leadership theory within the field of public administration and using Transformational Leadership Theory and Principal Agent Theory as an analytic lens, the aim of this article is to explore what makes the exercise of oversight roles and responsibilities by mayors less successful to improve performance and outcomes in local government turnaround strategies in Mpumalanga Province. The objectives are to (i.) assess whether mayors apply transformational leadership style to improve implementation of turnaround strategies in local governments, (ii.) determine the extent to which mayors are equipped and capable to provide

ethical leadership necessary for successful local government turnaround, (iii.) determine the extent to which mayors use principal-agent models to improve accountability and oversight in implementation of local government turnaround strategies, as well as (iv.) assess what makes a political leader in the position of an Executive Mayor to be suitably aligned with the objectives of the political system necessary to achieve transformation and local government turnaround.

5.3 Research questions

The primary research question that the study pursued is: To what extent is transformational leadership used to improve implementation oversight in turnaround strategies in Mpumalanga Province? The primary research above will be answered through four secondary research questions, that is;

- In what way do mayors apply transformational leadership style to improve implementation of turnaround strategies in local governments
- To what extent are mayors equipped and capable to provide ethical leadership necessary for successful local government turnaround?
- To what extent to do mayors use principal-agent models to improve accountability and oversight in implementation of local government turnaround strategies?
- What makes a political leader in the position of an Executive Mayor to be suitably aligned with the objectives of the political system necessary to achieve transformation and local government turnaround?

5.4 Research strategy, research design and methods

The literature reviewed highlights three fundamental research strategies: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed. Of these three research strategies, this article deploys the qualitative approach and the interpretivist paradigm to understand why mayors are struggling to turnaround the performance of their local governments. Further, the article employs a multiple-case design for a wider exploration of the research question and theoretical evolution which enable the researcher to understand the differences and similarities of across the three multiple-cases studied concerning implementation of turnaround strategies. To analyse research information, we deployed summative content analysis to extract meaning from textual data derived from interviews and focus groups (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Zhang and Wildemuth, 2011).

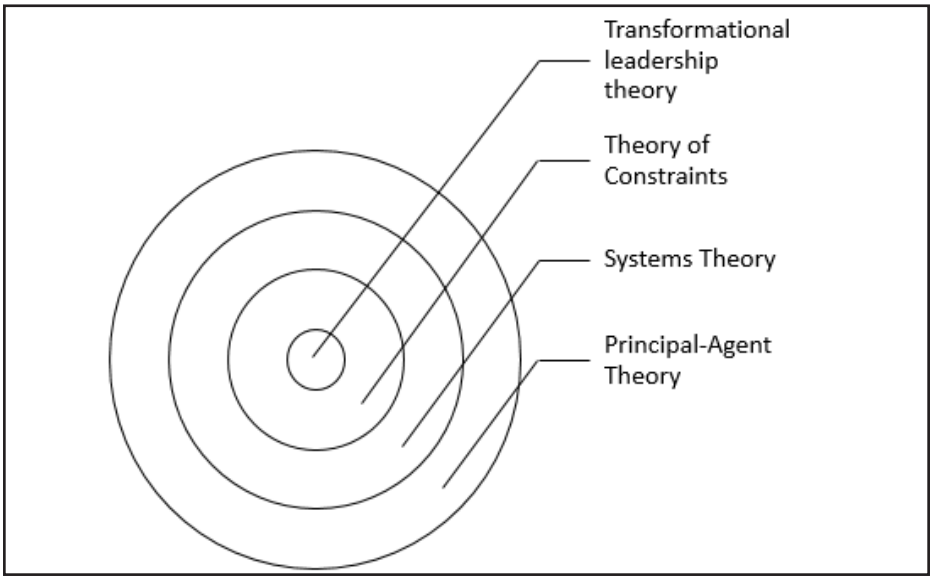
5.5 Proposed interpretative framework

Figure 4 presents a blend of our proposed interdisciplinary interpretative framework comprising the principal-agent theory (Ross and Mitnick, 1970), systems theory (Von Bertalanffy, 1930, 1972), theory of constraints, and transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1990 and Avolio and Bass, 1991) that provides

for a nuanced understanding of why mayors struggle to improve performance in local governments in the case study. Principal-agent theory provides flexibility to analyse complex organisational systems such as local government (Nyman, Nilsson and Rapp, 2005). It is an ideal framework for analysing complex accountability relationships and institutional barriers typical of local government systems. In addition to the principal-agent theory, we also employ the systems theory because it provides a useful mechanism for identifying and exploring complex relationships in government settings and changing environments.

Further, we also deploy the theory of constraints to unravel systemic predicaments that severely limit the capacity and ethical competence of mayors to deal decisively with performance problems plaguing their local governments. With its holistic approach to problem analysis (Orouji, 2016), the theory of constraints approach presents opportunities to determine how the political arrangements in local governments impacts on the leadership capabilities of mayors in discharging their oversight and accountability responsibilities in local government turnaround. The theory of constraints is ideal for restructuring and streamlining organisational systems to enhance performance and outcomes (Blackstone, 2001, Mabin and Balderstone, 2003 and Cox and Schleier, 2010. As argued by Balderstone and Mabin (2003), one of the fundamental attractions of theory of constraints is that it yields a systematic approach to analysing, locating and overcoming constraining behaviours that inhibit change in organisations.

Figure 3: Proposed interpretive framework



Lastly and embracing the above, transformational leadership theory is a key framework in our interrogation of leadership and political arrangements required for local government turnaround. Apart from advancing the four fundamental principles that enhance leadership, namely idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual motivation, and individualised consideration, transformational leadership theory provides for approaches and processes (Stentz and Matkin, 2012). Leaders improve their subordinates' performance through them practising the four principles (Bass and Avolio, 1990).

"Transformational leadership emerges more strongly and effectively in situations of crisis or uncertainty, like those that occur after elections" (Mokgolo, Mokgolo and Modiba, 2012: 2). With its high emphasis on strategic change and participatory practices, transformational leadership can help with improving service quality and outcomes that in turn lead to citizen satisfaction (Bumgarner, 2016).

6. CONCLUSION

On the basis of the studied reviewed, we have argued that mayors are struggling to revitalise and turnaround performance in their local governments precisely because they lack critical change-oriented capabilities and ethical competence required to effectively lead transformation and performance improvements in local government. We further pointed out that these predicaments are precipitated by the proportional representation system of local government which catapults mayors to political power through political party nominations; thus yielding pseudo-accountability systems that fail to enhance performance and service quality in local governments. With its interdisciplinary interpretative framework, this article has stirred a conceptual debate by arguing that the current mayoral leadership model and political arrangements suffer from lack of coherence which weakens mayors' ability to turnaround the performance of their local governments.

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