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Master's in Journalism

Maluti-a-Phofung: Maluti-a-Phofung: A study of municipal powers, state intervention, and meeting service delivery needs

A research report proposal submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts by coursework and research report.

Supervisor: Dr Dinesh Balliah

March 2024, Johannesburg

Abstract

The Maluti-a-Phofung local municipality in the Free State province of South Africa is noted as among the worst-performing municipalities in South Africa (Cronje, 2022). The Auditor General of South Africa (AGSA) has detailed in annual reports for a decade how the mismanagement of this municipality has led to service delivery failures. Maluti-a-Phofung is the biggest debtor to power utility Eskom, struggles with the provision of water, while all wastewater treatment works in the municipality have collapsed. This research project, in the format of longform narrative, explores how political and governance instability contributed to delivery failures in this municipality of more than 300 000 people which encompasses the towns of Harrismith, QwaQwa, Kestell, and Phuthaditjhaba.

The narrative long-form section specifically focuses on the impact of the service delivery failures and the lived experiences of the residents of this area. It gives a broad snapshot of everyday life dealing with the lack of consistent water, persistent electricity cuts, and intermittent refuse collection, among other municipal failures. It delves deep into the efforts of the community to overcome these challenges, which have hampered economic growth in the area. The long-form narrative details the political landscape and how the municipality transitioned from being governed by a single party to a coalition government. It portrays the lived consequences of bad politics and the impact political instability has had on people in the area.

Declaration

I declare that this research report proposal is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts by Coursework and Research Report in Journalism and Media Studies, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.

Qaanitah Hunter

15 March 2024

Johannesburg

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Contents

Abstract 2

Declaration 3

Acknowledgments 4

Introduction 7

1. Background 9

Decline in services 11

3. Rationale 14

3.1 An account of failure in a South African municipality 14

4. Literature review 16

4.1 How does local government work in South Africa? 16

4.2 History of the formation of Maluti-a-Phofung local municipality 17

4.3 Failure of local government 18

4.4 The effect of apartheid on local government 18

5. Methodology 20

5.1 Narrative nonfiction 20

5.2 Story-telling approach 21

5.3 Structure and Point of View 22

5.4 Style and analysis 23

6. Process 25

6.1 Pre-fieldwork research 25

6.2 Fieldwork: Interviews and observations 25

7. Ethical considerations 27

8. Conclusion 29

References 31

Part two: Long-form Narrative 33

Annexure 58

Introduction

> *In the end, when local government fails, it isn't just service delivery that fails. It isn't just that our people's expectations are not met. The failure of local government has a direct and material impact on economic growth and job creationI.*
>
> - Cyril Ramaphosa (The Presidency, 2022).

Nestled in the Drakensberg Mountain range, on the border of KwaZulu-Natal, Free State, and Lesotho, the Maluti-a-Phofung municipality governs the towns of Harrismith, Kestell, QwaQwa, and Phuthaditjhaba. This local municipality located in the Free State has been identified as one of the worst-performing municipalities by the office of the Auditor General (Cronje, 2022), and basic services are almost non-existent. The municipality has for the last decade struggle to function optimally and has persistent interruption in executing its core functions.

The municipality has a population of 398 459 people, with an unemployment rate of 41.8%. The situation is worse among the youth of Maluti-a-Phofung, having an unemployment rate of 53% (Stats SA, 2011). It is a municipality ravaged by poverty, where only 30% of residents have a flushing toilet connected to the sewer system, and only 31% have piped water inside their dwellings (StatsSA, 2011). Further, less than 25% of households in the area have access to weekly refuse removal.

For a decade, the municipality has experienced a regression in the delivery of basic services and a continued failure of governance. This has affected the people living in the area, already grappling with heightened poverty and unemployment. While a municipality has the right to self-govern in South Africa, a provincial government can intervene in the case of maladministration and failure to govern or provide essential services (Section 139 (1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). This intervention by the provincial government to appoint administrators to assist the municipality. was eventually withdrawn after making no progress(Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2022b). By appointing administrators to assist the municipality get its affairs in order, government believed the plight of residents would be alleviated. Very little happened in that regard. Further, the municipality's issues are yet to be solved, with the South African Municipal Workers Union threatening the municipality with legal action on service delivery (Mavuso, 2023a).

This study consists of two parts: a background, literature, and theory section and a narrative long form. The theoretical section outlines the history of service delivery failures, municipal mismanagement, and the impact of corruption on service delivery. It gives a thorough breakdown of the dysfunctionality in the municipality and the developments that led the municipality down this path. It further details the history of the area in terms of apartheid and its geography. The theoretical section explores how local government works in South Africa and how the formation of the Maluti-a-Phofung municipality may be the reason for its persisting failures. This section explores the underlying issues contributing to failures in local government. The politics of the municipality where went from being a single-party governed area to being run by a coalition government in 2021.

I was fascinated and appalled by the deterioration of basic services in Maluti-a-Phofung, covering governance for over a decade. Every year, the situation deteriorates further in terms of governance and service delivery. Among the many dysfunctional municipalities in South Africa, Maluti-a-Phofung has topped every failure category. It provided an interesting case study because of the extent of the failures and its profound impact on its communities.

The service delivery failures are plentiful and layered. On one hand, the municipality faces a power crisis, sustained water cuts, and interruptions to refuse removal. On the other hand, governance has all but collapsed. In 2023, ailing power utility Eskom named Maluti-a-Phofung as its highest debtor - it owes Eskom R7.2bn (Schrieber, 2023). In addition to load-shedding imposed by Eskom country-wide, many towns under this municipality face rolling blackouts. In September 2022, residents of Harrismith took to the streets in protest after facing a two-week power outage (Mopeli, 2022). The area is also facing a severe water crisis. Current Auditor General, Tsakani Maluleke, noted that all seven wastewater treatment works in the municipality had "collapsed" due to a combination of poor management, theft, and vandalism (Koka, 2022). This means wastewater that has not been treated has polluted nearby rivers and dams. But what is it like to live and survive in one of the worst run municipalities in South Africa? The long-form narrative will focus on the people who experience the inefficiencies and failures of local government. Service delivery failures are often reported in the South African media in figures and percentages or through protests which seem to be sporadic.

Beyond the millions of Rands in debt, money lost to corruption, and money lost through inefficiency, lies a community that suffers the consequences every day.

This project tells the story of government failures and how these affect the people living in Maluti-a-Phofung. It will tell the story of the resilience of a community, who from 2018 have been working to force government to effect change. It will profile the people who have commandeered the role of local government for the good of the people, where business forums have taken government to court, and how unemployed youth work to provide services for businesses in the area. At the same time, it will document the story of those who have lost hope in the fluid political system.

This narrative brings together the lived experiences of people residing in the area and the politics that they are arguably victims off. It paints a picture of everyday life but takes the reader into the heart of the problems at play. It goes beyond describing a helpless scenario and explores the theme of a desperate want for change at a local municipality level.

1. Background

Local elections were first held in Maluti-a-Phofung in 2000 - residents vote every five years to elect the council, who in turn elect the mayor. As a district municipality, Maluti-a-Phofung has a small council of sixty-nine members elected through a mixed-member proportional representation system. According to the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC, 2023) municipal election is a mixed or hybrid system, making use of both the ward and the proportional representation (PR) system.

In Maluti-a-Phofung, thirty-five councillors are directly elected. The remaining 34 seats of council are chosen from party lists, allowing for the total number of party representatives to be proportional to the number of votes received. The party with the greatest number of seats takes over the governing of the municipality, and so elect a mayor and mayoral committee.

The ANC has held a massive majority in the municipality since the 2000 vote, where they received 51 of 69 seats. In the ensuing 2006 elections, they rose to 55 seats. In the 2011 local government election, the ANC received 52 seats, and then dropped to 47 seats in the 2016 vote. In the 2021 local government elections, the party lost its majority by a landslide,

garnering 28 seats - less than the majority they needed to govern the municipality (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996).

Widespread corruption has plagued the ailing municipality and has contributed to a major shift of the political dynamic within the council. In 2018, the ANC expelled 16 councillors seeking to uncover corruption in the municipality (Masuabi, 2021). The councillors sided with the opposition to remove the then-mayor, who was accused of gross corruption. The group of ex-ANC councillors vowed to contest the ANC and formed the MAP16 party, which contested the 2021 municipal elections (Hunter, 2021). The ANC lost its majority, declining from 67.4% to 39.2%, while MAP16 garnered 28.5% of the vote. MAP16 then took over the running of the municipality through a coalition with five other parties, including the EFF (Hunter, 2021).

There are longstanding concerns about why the municipality was not put under administration by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs. The Free State provincial government withdrew its intervention under Section 139 of the Constitution in 2020 (Oates, 2023). Section 139 (7) of the Constitution (1996) empowers the national government to intervene when a municipality cannot or does not fulfil an executive obligation in terms of the Constitution or legislation. This means that there will be no executive positions occupied in the local government, and that an administrator is appointed to manage the day-to-day running of the municipality, in this instance, Mr Mokete Duma (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2022b).

While the dislodging of the ANC was seen by opposition parties as a major victory for service delivery by voters, the coalition government did not enact the speedy change of governance that residents expected (Hancke, 2023). A committee report in Parliament tabled in November 2022 noted that after an oversight visit to the area, Members of Parliament believed that, “despite the introduction of a coalition government, the municipality remained the most unstable municipality in the country” (Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG), 2022).

Decline in services

From as far back as 2015, multinational food and beverage company Nestle appealed for intervention from national government, citing persistent electricity and water infrastructure failures in the area (South African Government, 2018). Nestle is a food manufacturer with factories in Harrismith. The company expanded their factories in the area in 2009 by making a R345 million investment (Bizcommunity, March 2009)

Perpetual electricity cuts and water shortages in and around Harrismith cost businesses millions of Rands lost in profits. It was clear through the Auditor General reports from the end of the 2016/2017 financial year that the municipality had financially regressed (Auditor General South Africa, 2020).

On February 10th 2018, the municipality was placed under administration when the Free State provincial executive decided to invoke Section 139 (1) (b) (Free State Province, n.d.) of the Constitution to take over the administrative operations of the municipality (*Maluti-a-Phofung Municipality and Others v South African Municipal workers Union (SAMWU) and Others*, 2020). This is because the municipality failed its basic governance functions. However, a 2020 report to Parliament showed that little was resolved through this intervention in Maluti-a-Phofung. It was dubbed as the "most unstable" municipality in the country by Parliament (2020), and as among the worst performing municipalities by the Auditor General. In October 2020, a report from the Research Unit of Parliament described the challenges of the municipality as:

> "Water, sanitation, roads & streets, refuse removal, ageing, poorly maintained infrastructure, housing, electricity, inability to spend infrastructure grants, improper use of financial resources, disagreements over goals and priorities, power politics," (Mahlangeni & Ntaka, 2020, p. 8).

When it came to governance, Parliament said of Maluti-a-Phofung: "Poor controls for supply chain management in place. Political instability negatively impacts decision making, strategic direction and oversight that is needed to enable effective service delivery in a financially sustainable manner" (Mahlangeni & Ntaka, 2020, p. 8).

In 2018, Eskom began a process of cutting electricity supply to the area as the municipality failed to service its increasing debt to the power utility. Eskom has threatened power cuts across the municipality for unpaid bills amounting to almost R3-billion, bills unpaid

since 2011 (Sosibo, 2018). Five years later, Eskom named Maluti-a-Phofung as its highest debtor, owing Eskom R7.2bn (Schrieber, 2023).

A report to Parliament by the Free State's Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) department noted that the provision of water to communities continues to be a problem for the municipality (Felix, 2022). COGTA aims to strengthen cooperative governance and support municipalities as well as traditional leadership across the province. The water crisis is exacerbated by ageing infrastructure, causing the municipality to rely on water tankers to provide water to residents. While only 25% of residents in the area have access to weekly refuse removal (StatsSA, 2011), waste removal has been hampered by the need for more trucks (Felix, 2022).

Basic municipal services often ground to a halt because the cash-strapped municipality failed to pay salaries. In November 2022, the municipality issued a letter to staff saying salaries could not be paid due to non-payment of services and continued vandalism of electrical infrastructure (Luvhengo, 2022). In the same month, IOL (2022) reported that a sheriff from Harrismith went to the municipality's offices placed municipal vehicles and other items under judicial attachment in an effort to recover money owed by the municipality.

While some of the municipality's issues are systemic, corruption has further accelerated decay. In August 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa signed a Special Investigating Unit (SIU) proclamation to investigate corruption spanning eight years, since January 2012 (Maqhina, 2020) - the report by Maqhina noted that the probe was linked to allegations of maladministration in awarding tenders for the compilation of a register of indigent people and events management services in Maluti-a-Phofung. It stated:

The probe would cover any alleged serious maladministration, improper or unlawful conduct by municipal officials or employees and unlawful appropriation or expenditure of public money or property. It will also extend to loss of public money or damage to public property, offence as defined in the Prevention and Combating of Corrupt Activities Act and any unlawful or improper conduct by any person which has caused or may cause serious harm to the interests of the public (Maqhina, 2020).

There has been little to no public reporting on the outcome of the SIU probe. However, in August 2022, Maluti-a-Phofung Municipality manager Futhuli Patrick Mothamaha appeared

in the Phuthaditjhaba Magistrate's Court in the Free State facing charges of fraud, corruption, uttering, and contravening the Municipal Finance Management Act (Bhengu, 2022). News24 reported at the time that Hawks spokesperson Captain Christopher Singo said the charges against Mothamaha emanated from a R58 million contract he allegedly unlawfully awarded to the Kill Crime Security Company in 2020. Mothamaha is out on bail (Bhengu, 2022).

The situation appears to be deteriorating every year in both service delivery and corruption at the embattled municipality. The Auditor General handed the matter over to the Financial Intelligence Centre (FIC) for investigation after the municipality could not provide evidence of most financial transactions for the past financial year (Mohapi, 2022).

The municipality is now governed through a coalition government with no end in sight to the persisting problems. Residents who were interviewed for the narrative section of this study detailed how the situation was getting worse. Electricity cuts are more frequent and water outages are a persistent problem- among many other failures.

3. Rationale

3.1 An account of failure in a South African municipality

South Africa has 257 metropolitan, district and local municipalities. This number comprises eight metropolitan, 44 district and 205 local municipalities. President Cyril Ramaphosa announced in his State of the Nation Address that 163 out of 257 municipalities are dysfunctional or in distress due to poor governance, ineffective and sometimes corrupt financial and administrative management, and poor service delivery (Mavuso, 2023b). So why does this story warrant telling? And what makes Maluti-a-Phofung unique?

The salient feature of Maluti-a-Phofung is that it represents all that is bad at the local government level. Its failures can be divided into two categories: i) systemic failures inherited from the apartheid government where some areas (like Harrismith) are more developed than others (like Qwaqwa). This can be attributed to apartheid spatial planning (Marais 2005), ageing infrastructure, and rampant poverty in areas. And ii) governance failures which have led to a lack of basic services.

The politics of the area are intriguing and gripping. Despite the persistent failures, the ANC was the dominant political party in the area for 20 years. That was until a group of ANC councillors were booted out of the party for flagging corruption. The group sided with the opposition led by the DA to vote out a mayor accused of corruption, and so the ANC responded by expelling them from the party. This group formed MAP16 which garnered 28.5% of the vote, enough to form a coalition with opposition political parties. With the ANC's constituency declining from 67.4% to 39.2% in one election, residents were elated that this political change would warrant a difference (Hunter, 2021). However, the coalition government has resulted in more instability and a further decline in services.

The people who live in Maluti-a-Phofung are the central focus of this story. Residents are divided along apartheid spatial planning lines, with some areas more severely affected by contemporary government failures than others. Combining the history of parts of the municipality - where QwaQwa was a self-governing Bantustan under apartheid (Pitso, 2009), and the history of Harrismith as an important location in the Anglo-Boer war (Dreyer & Loock, 2014) - the story of the people who live here is fascinating. The geospatial aspects of the municipality add an interesting and unique layer: these towns are on the periphery of the provinces of the Free State and KwaZulu-Natal, and the Kingdom of Lesotho. It also is situated along a major transport route in the country which plays a role for the economic prospects of the towns.

3.2 Personal motivation

I have detailed the central failures of governance in Maluti-a-Phofung through Auditor General reports, parliamentary committee reports and political speeches throughout my career as a political reporter for over a decade. When the situation looks like it can't deteriorate any further, another report comes out detailing further decay.

I have always had a sense of guilt in how we cover the plight of the people who live in the towns governed by the Maluti-a-Phofung municipality. Only when residents violently protest by blocking national routes like the N3 which runs from Johannesburg to Durban, do

journalists give attention to the residents – focusing on the disturbance, disorder, and the rampage caused by protestors.

The outcome of the 2021 local government election piqued my interest in this municipality as the ANC's power declined significantly in this particular local election interested in tracking failures and successes of coalition governments and the connection to changes in service delivery. Coalition governments are often dotted with instability, and I am interested to see whether things have worsened or improved in one of the worst municipalities in South Africa.

The purpose of this project was to not report the plight of this area from afar but to spend time in the community and talk to people from across racial and economic groupings. This project is people-centred so that it can zoom into the under-reported area of the consequences of ill-governance and political instability.

4. Literature review

4.1 How does local government work in South Africa?

In 1996, when the Constitution of South Africa was adopted, local government was elevated to a sphere of government where, as per the Constitution, a municipality governed the community's affairs (South African Local Government Association (SALGA), 2017). Government is divided into three parts - national, provincial, and local government. While national and provincial government has oversight over local government, it is the mandate of municipalities to govern the local matters of their respective areas.

According to chapter 7 of the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996) the objectives 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 a safe and healthy environment; and
(e) to encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in the matters of local government.

After the Constitution was adopted, the Municipal Structures Act of 1998 was enacted, which states that outside of metropolitan areas - of which there are eight - local government is

further divided into a two-tier system. This resulted in 228 local municipalities grouped into 44 district municipalities (SALGA, 2017). After the division into municipalities, there were several laws passed to determine how municipalities would be governed. The Municipal Systems Act of 2000 outlines a range of developmental duties assigned to local government, including the responsibility to provide an accountable and democratic government without favour or prejudice, that should aim to encourage the involvement of communities in local government matters (Municipal Systems Act, 2000).

Local government was created to establish wall-to-wall municipalities for multiple reasons: to address the consequences of apartheid and enable transformation; to provide services to communities throughout the territory of South Africa; to address institutional backlogs; to enable the concept of a shared services option and governance; and to provide consistent oversight (Local Government Sector Education and Training Authority (LGSETA), 2019).

Furthermore, local government in South Africa exists within the democratic system of government. This is based on the ideal that citizens are free to choose, check and replace their leaders, the active participation of the citizen in politics and civic life, protection of the human rights of citizen, and a rule of law (Breakfast et al 2015).

4.2 History of the formation of Maluti-a-Phofung local municipality

On 5 December 2001, a law was passed to establish the Maluti-a-Phofung local municipality, situated in the Free State Province, and forms part of the Thabo Mofutsanyane District municipality (Integrated Development Plan Steering Committee, 2011). The municipal area includes four towns: QwaQwa, Phuthaditjhaba, Harrismith and Kestell. Before the municipality's establishment, each town was governed by Transitional Local Council authorities (TLC's) which were put in place after 1993 when South Africa transitioned to democracy. During this time, provisions were made for abolishing race- based local authorities in urban areas and replacing them with non-racial TLC's (LGSETA, 2019). The Transitional Local Councils of these four towns were merged to form the Maluti-a-Phofung municipality that now covers 34 wards over 4421 km^2 (Integrated Development Plan Steering Committee, 2011).

Phuthaditjhaba is the urban centre of Qwaqwa and houses the administrative head office of Maluti-A-Phofung municipality. Up until 1994, Qwaqwa was one of 10 Homelands granted self-government by the apartheid government in 1974 (South African History Online, 2019). It was reincorporated into South Africa in 1994. The area, nestled in the Sandstone Hills of the Drakensberg Mountains, had originally been the home of the Bakwena and Batlokoa groups, and when they united in 1969, the region was called KwaKwa, which changed to Quaqua in the same year (Twala & Barnard, 2006).

Harrismith was founded in 1849 by British Governor Harry Smith and was a major base during the Anglo-Boer War (Dreyer & Loock, 2014). It is currently a service centre for the surrounding rural areas and a trading belt serving the passing N3 (StatsSA 2022). Another town of the Maluti-a-Phofung municipality is Kestell, which is a service center for the surrounding rural areas. Kestell is situated along the N5 road that links Harrismith with Bethlehem in the Free State (StatsSA 2022). The rural areas of Malti-a-Phofung mostly comprise of agricultural farming and nature conservation which has become a tourist destination.

4.3 Failure of local government

When the South African Constitution was adopted in 1996, the state had a vision of local government playing a central; role in the development of the country. However, government has failed to live up to that. Ndletyana (2007) pointed out that the failure of local government was manifest in the continuing service delivery protests across the country, and the unpleasing audit opinions by the Auditor General indicating unhealthy financial management in municipalities.

National Treasury, in its diagnostic review of the system of capacity building in local government (2022) pointed out that there are widespread shortcomings in local government, and many municipalities are consistently unable to meet their planned or mandated service delivery targets. This resulted in a high level of citizen dissatisfaction. While it is widely acknowledged that local government has contributed to the delivery of basic services to a significant number of households over the past 25 years, cumulatively, local government has failed to meet the ambitious developmental roles that were envisaged in the 1998 White Paper on Local Government (Department of National Treasury, 2022).

Swilling (2013) argues that local government is not appropriately configured to meet the sustainable development challenge. He noted that, “Instead, it is caught between two mutually exclusive paradigms: the municipal developmentalism that inspires the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 and integrated development plans (IDPs) in particular; and the environmental conservationism that inspires the National Environmental Management Act 107 of 1998 and environmental impact assessments (EIAs) in particular. Neither of these policy frames adequately define what sustainable urban development means.” Many municipalities are unable to meet their constitutional objectives. Greyling (2014) contended that there is actually very little empirical knowledge in South Africa about whether any particular municipality actually has the capacity to meet its constitutional objectives to provide services for residents.

4.4 The effect of apartheid on local government

South Africa’s transition to democracy after 1994 led to a significant transformation of how the state was structured and operated, compared to the apartheid state (Klug, 2016). The structure of local government today did not exist pre-1994. Before 1994, only a relatively small area of South Africa was governed by local municipalities and responsible for services for a small part of the population. Klug (2016) noted that under apartheid, there was not any meaningful decentralization of services.

After the 1994 elections, there was significant focus on changing the institutional framework of inter-governmental relations. Tshishonga and de Vries (2011) explain that the changes made by democratic dispensation were aimed at morphing the state into a ‘developmental state,’ which was understood to mean that the state had a key role to play in addressing the socio-economic injustices of the apartheid past. In line with creating this ‘developmental state,’ South Africa elected to have a wall-to-wall municipal system, meaning that municipalities would have significantly expanded mandates that would see them with large responsibility for delivering services and goods (Department of National Treasury, 2022). The change in the law, and the adoption of a new framework on local government, has resulted in local government overseeing a long list of socio-economic responsibilities. This includes delivery of all basic services, playing a role in economic development, and regulation of land-use.

Palmer et al(2017) argue that the legacies of apartheid dysfunctionalities continue to impact inter-governmental cooperation between the three spheres of government - any failure by local government to deliver on its mandate undermines the entire national developmental agenda. The legacy of apartheid has impacted local government in a myriad of ways. Apartheid spatial planning, for one, significantly influenced the ability of municipalities to deliver services. The pattern of urban expansion has had profound implications for service delivery and infrastructural renewal priorities (Robinson, 2013). Post-apartheid local government has struggled to deal with urban growth and has battled in its efforts to redirect infrastructural investments to poor neighbourhoods. This meant that much of apartheid's legacy has been perpetuated, instead of radically overhauled, by local government despite the noble intentions of the drafters of the Constitution.

Robinson (2013, p. 44) summarised it thus: "The break with apartheid means that it is not possible to imagine a seamless timeline of historical endeavour. Strong discontinuities have been created in our cities' histories – something to be celebrated! But such a view could too easily feed a triumphalism for those writing in the post-apartheid era. And certainly, strong continuities remain – an important basis for legitimate political protest about the speed and form of service delivery or continuing social and spatial inequality. But an overly pessimistic conclusion about the persistence of apartheid would, I suggest here, also not be merited."

5. Methods

5.1 Narrative nonfiction

His [Ramaphosa's] party has failed us in this town, and we want to make that known to him. We want to hear what he will do to the failing leaders and don't care much about the apologies cause those don't really do much in terms of changing the conditions that we are being subjected to.

- 72-year-old Joseph Mokoena, resident of Maluti-a-Phofung

The long-form, non-fiction, narrative research project aims to tell the story of the people affected by the lack of service delivery, ill-governance, and corruption in the Maluti-a-Phofung municipality. First, it aims to sketch a picture of the lived reality of the people who live in the towns governed by this municipality. Second, it aims to show the links between politics and governance failures, as well as the scale of these failures. Third, it seeks to tell the story of the resilience and fortitude of the residents of this town who have been at the receiving end of these multiple failures.

While much is written about the failures of government and service delivery protests, there is very little academic literature on the people directly and adversely affected. There is abundant research available on the failures of local government, but those impacted are rarely considered.

While residents of Maluti-a-Phofung have resorted to protest action in 2020 and again in 2022, their individual plight, the layers of their challenges, and their unique responses are very rarely captured. This project aims to tell the complex stories of those who are at the centre of the failures and to document their experiences of living in what is consistently described as the worst and most unstable municipality in South Africa. It will detail the day-to-day lived experiences of the residents of Maluti-a-Phofung, how they view the breakdown in governance, how they interpret the political dynamic in the area, and how they respond and adapt to municipal failures.

In effect, this project seeks to investigate the human consequences of bad politics. Political failures are at the centre of why residents have erratic supply of water and electricity. Corruption by both politicians and civil servants has hollowed out the municipality's resources such that there is barely any money to provide basic services or pay salaries. The consequences on residents are felt every day. This long-form narrative project seeks to unpack the failures and the different ways they have resulted in changes in the political sphere of the municipality.

5.2 Story-telling approach

I have written many news stories about service delivery failures in Maluti-a-Phofung, and in South Africa generally. Stories with simple, cold facts barely make an impact in expressing the full extent of these crises, unpacking the nuanced layers of the problem, and fully expressing the voices of most affected. Thus, I have opted to write this research report in the long-form genre of narrative nonfiction and, as a result, I will employ writing techniques such as scene construction, use of dialogue, focusing on detail, and adding context to flesh out information.

This narrative nonfiction project will be a first-hand account where I embark on a fact-finding mission to answer the questions: What is life like for the people living in a municipality considered the worst in South Africa? Using the narrative form, I will be able to tell this story to the best of my ability, using the power of the truth and technique to tell a compelling story. Including descriptions, scenes, dialogue and detail will make this topic appealing to the reader and reiterate the human element in the matter of service delivery. The stories of community, failure of government, and resilience layered with background, history and context promise to be a compelling read.

The definitions of narrative are many in the academic field. The teller aspires for meaning to be conveyed to the audience. The teller may or may not consciously do this to make sense of the occurrences or their experiences. More and more stories are being told about ordinary, quotidian, and personal experiences. This also aligns with the accentuation of ordinary people's stories and experiences to make sense of what has been happening in Maluti-a-Phofung.

5.3 Structure and Point of View

I tackled the story of Maluti-a-Phofung in three linked broad sections. The first is a description of current day-to-day life in the area. The content was derived through wide-ranging interviews, observations and relevant documentation. The reader will get a strong sense of the feel of the area, the lived experiences of the residents and the magnitude of the problems they face. This was done by spending time in an informal settlement in QwaQwa and speaking to people who reside there as well as spending time in Harrismith and interacting with

residents who are on a higher socio-economic level. While their lived experiences may be different, the challenges of the lack of clean water, on-going electricity outages and other failures of government are consistent. This story is constructed through the lens of the poor and the affluent and moves between the lived experiences of people from both groupings. It also includes various race and age groups.

The second part of the story focuses on the interventions by the residents to the persisting failures. It paints a picture of residents doing the work of local government themselves. It includes interviews with an organisation that is central to providing services privately that the municipality fails to do. It details how businesses and communities band together to deal with the persisting problems and how a noble community effort exposes the faultiness of inequality in the area.

The third part of the narrative delves deeply into the political situation in the area and tracks the ever-shifting political dynamics. It tells the story of the political decline of the ANC and the transition to coalition politics. Layered with nuance, this chapter identifies key protagonists who played a central role in the politics of Maluti-a-Phofung. It tells the story of malfeasance and corruption and how that defined the political trajectory of the council.

The fourth part pulls all the above strands together and focuses on the economic consequences of the dysfunctional politics. It features stories of business people who have tried to remain resilient in the wake of mounting difficulties. It tells the stories of business people who have worked to become independent of the government that is meant to provide basic services. It explores possible solutions put forward by residents which include the splitting of the municipality into two. Further, it looks to the future of the political terrain and what the current government led by the ANC seeks to assure residents. The story concludes with a story of hope and details how a local investor still believes in the town despite its rapid decline.

5.4 Style and analysis

This project draws from the style of '*How to Steal a City*' by Crispian Olver (2017). This book is about the extent of state capture and corruption in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality. Olver relates a complicated story about a single municipality in the first person, drawing on his experiences as a government official and an ANC activist. '*How to Steal a City*' intertwines history, politics, and current affairs to describe how the administration of this municipality was captured by a criminal syndicate.

I drew inspiration from Olver's work, specifically from his ability to tell a gripping story, layered in context and rich detail. His insider account of ANC corruption as a government official is a huge distinguishing feature. I aim to provide similar insight given my experience covering municipal decay and politics in South Africa for over a decade. I will use a similar approach to his fiction-like style to tell stories connected to the theme of municipal failures in Maluti-a-Phofung. While I am not a participant-researcher, in that I do not live in the area, I believe my experience covering the area gives me a knowledgeable perspective of the situation from an outsider's perspective.

Further, in keeping chronology as a thread in telling a complex story, I refer to the work of Allister Sparks in '*Tomorrow is Another Country*' (1994). Sparks tells the story of South Africa's transition to democracy, including rich dialogue and factual details from documents in a way that creates compelling scenes. Through Sparks' work, I understood how to use interviews in telling stories and to avoid a hearsay approach typical in journalism. Although this book is not a narrative, there are techniques of writing used by Sparks that I would employ in my work.

I was guided by the narrative style employed by Katherin Boo in '*Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity*' (2014). Boo, a journalist with experience reporting on impoverished communities, profiled the story of Annawadi, a makeshift settlement in the shadow of luxury hotels near the Mumbai airport. Boo tells the story of this fascinating neighbourhood through the lens of interesting residents who become central characters in the book.

I was also drawn to Wolfe's New Journalism (1973) – a manifesto guide on how to tell a story that captures the attention of readers through journalism-style reporting and fiction-like attention to detail, creating scenes and capturing dialogue. Wolfe and Johnson (1973) explain

four main points of New Journalism. First, the writer as a first-hand witness constructs the story scene by scene, recreating the story for the reader. Second is extensive use of dialogue – recording and reporting people's words conveys immediacy to the reader and establishes people in the story much like characters in fiction. Third, is the use of the third person to give the reader insights into motivations, thoughts, and actions of people in the narrative. This will be challenged in this research as I wish to integrate my subjectivity in this narrative as I am a form of outsider in the context of this research. Fourth, Wolfe explains the detailed inclusion of surroundings, specifically what people surround themselves with – breaking these details down brings the reader close to the 'characters' to see people from their perspectives (to see the person as they wish to be portrayed).

Of course, there was limitations in what can be realistically executed once data has been collected. The analysis was inevitably be iterative (Bryman, 2012), developing from and influenced by what the participants choose to share and disclose.

5.6. Process

5.6.1 Pre-fieldwork research

In researching the decay in Maluti-a-Phofung, I began with using data and information from the Auditor General reports from the last seven years to track the decline of services. This will serve as a foundational account of the state of governance in the municipality. This data was be supplemented with reports from oversight committees to Parliament, as well as reports by SALGA on the state of local government and Maluti-a-Phofung in particular. All these reports will be compared over the periods of time that they cover, to explore changes over time. I have already used some of these reports for the background of this research and will use the facts and figures to compliment what I found in the field. These reports form the factual basis of my long-form piece and informed my in-field work.

To track the political situation in the municipality, I relied on news reports, from online news to print media, and other sources tracking such developments. This enabled me to chart political history, trends, and developments. News reports assisted me in understanding the political environment, trace contemporaneous corruption probes, and contextualise the residents' responses. Thorough pre-fieldwork research prepared me to be competently

prepared for interviews, and to better understand what I am looking for in the field and what questions I should focus on.

5.6.2 Fieldwork: Interviews and observations

Purposive sampling was employed to find participants. This means that not every person in this population was interviewed – people had to meet certain criteria that ensure that they will be able to provide relevant information for the research (Daniel, 2012). I first looked for residents of Maluti-a-Phofung. Then I grouped those who live in QwaQwa and those who live in Harrismith as two broad groups of people living in built up suburbs and those living in informal settlements and peri-rural areas. I focused on a cross section of races, including black, Indian and white residents.

I began the research by first interviewing residents who have taken matters into their own hands and have volunteered to make the area habitable for citizens. This group include business groups, civil society organisations, and local non-profits. An example is a local apolitical, non-profit organisation HIT (standing for Harrismith, Intabazwe and Tshiame) who work to supply services meant to be delivered by the municipality (Hancke, 2023). I believe that observing such groups working in the area and conducting interviews gave a rich, first-hand perspective of their initiative and to witness their impact (Gournelos et al., 2019). Telling the story of an apolitical organisation stepping in to do the work of the municipality would demonstrate the extent of the rot, detail the nature of the decay, and amplify the story of the towns from the viewpoint of people dedicated to making it work against all odds. By starting with these interviews, I was able to identify the type of people I wanted to interview next and the areas of focus I needed to explore.

The second set of interviews focused on the community affected by the absence of services. I selected people to tell their stories about what life in Maluti-a-Phofung means with a lack of basic services others take for granted. It first included someone who is unemployed which represents a large group of the residents of the area. It also included residents of both QwaQwa and Harrismith- showing the juxtaposition of the two towns under the same municipality. It focused on a resident who is self-employed and others who run businesses in

the community. By telling these stories, residents detailed the burden of life with limited basic services.

I purposely included the voices of the poor and vulnerable, who are hardest hit by the lack of services. I would devoted space in the report to address indignities faced by the poor who are forgotten by the government meant to take care of them. My aim was to find unique voices in the community through whose lens the story of the municipality's decay is told I tried to do this by spending time with a resident in her quest to find water and drove through the area with them to get a lived sense of life in the area.

Third, I explored changes in the political landscape and how the impact this has had on these communities. In pursuit of that, I interviewed key political players, which include the governing MAP16, as well as the DA, who are the official opposition. I also interviewed the governing ANC and spend time unpacking the political landscape with the incumbent Speaker of the municipality. The interviews for this narrative long-form was done in person and additional interviews were done telephonically. As was the case for all interviews conducted for this project, I recorded the interviews with the consent of the participants and transcribed the interviews on my return from the area.

I decided to visit the area on two occasions, a month apart after consultation with my supervisor. During my interviews, I spent time in both Harrismith and QwaQwa and interviewed majority of the participants in person. I spent time observing the people I interviewed and conducted follow up conversations with them subsequent to my visits to clarify information and fill in blanks. I also conducted interviews telephonically with some key players. These include politicians who were unable to meet me in the area and business people who for various reasons, like ill-health- were unable to meet me in person. The story is layered with quotes from people interviewed and details of their lives observed. The variety of the people interviewed also contributes to the richness of the story-telling.

6. Ethical considerations

The long-form narrative used the personal stories of people living and working in the areas under Maluti-a-Phofung. This research detailed a lot of their personal stories and experiences therefore, people will be invited to volunteer to participate. I relied on people who are vocal in their communities and were driven to speak to be as part of their activism. Participants had the power to withdraw from the study and ask for their data to be withdrawn. This was clearly confirmed to them.

Before conducting interviews, I sought ethical clearance from the Wits Centre for Journalism Ethics committee which gave me the green light. After reviewing my ethics application with my proposal, the research project was approved in line with the ethical standards of the University. The research was also guided by the South African Press Code of Ethics for journalists in writing the long-form narrative inclusive of applied journalistic ethics principles like a right of reply, among other things.

Participants were not forced to answer all questions. It was made clear to them that questions they feel uncomfortable or uncertain answering can be skipped. I will only write the stories of those who have given permission and will be very meticulous in ensuring what I write is accurate and just (Frost, 2016). Participants will be assured of this by requesting their consent to participate and to record the interviews.

The purpose of the research was explained to every person interviewed. They were aware of the topic, the motive and the process to be undertaking in writing the long-form narrative. I also provided each person with an information letter stating the purpose of the research, as well as my contact details. The participants had the option to choose whether they want to be names or to remain anonymous. All interviews relied on the study were on the record interviews done with participants who agreed to be named.

Before conducting the interviews, I had a thorough discussion with a participants on to ensure that they experience no negative consequences because of my work. Where I received information from whistleblowers and politicians, I sought to corroborate the information with other sources and or evidence, and to protect their identity in accordance with journalistic best practice.

In engaging with participants, I was encouraged their willingness to be honest and open in my role as an unfamiliar observer by clearly explaining my intentions and establishing trust. I understood that my introduction to them as a Wits University student might influence participation given the prestige and reputation of the institution, and that introducing myself as a journalist might both encourage and discourage openness and honesty. To address this, I ensured that I clearly explain the purpose and proposed outcome of this research (the story), and the participants' role in it.

I further acknowledge that conducting interviews in English and through interpreters may have affected how people expressed themselves. All of the people I encountered were comfortable with communicating in English even when English was not their first language. During some interviews, I was cautious and sensitive so that meaning is not lost in translation. As much as I allowed people to express themselves fully in their native language, many opted to communicate in English.

When concluding the interviews, I saved the recorded interviews on a cloud drive via a secure laptop. I then transcribed in full all of the interviews done and saved it in a single folder in a drive. This is to ensure that I have a proper record of the information-gathering part of the process.

In terms of reflexivity, I considered subjectivity and representation. Most of this long-form narrative is written in the first person, so "I" will be the story's narrator. I will ensure that I write what I see, observe, hear and feel. This means the reader will understand that it will be subjective and the facts was be narrated through me. This subjectivity is inevitable and I will try consciously to be as objective as possible and to balance all parts of the story.

8. Conclusion

Concerns of service delivery are an issue faced by the whole country. There is a decline of basic services in municipalities in all nine provinces. While changes in legislation since 1994 have led to numerous advancements in various sectors, service delivery has been an issue that, when not adequately managed by government, can lead to far-reaching and intensive hurdles for residents and businesses alike. This is because legislation that governs local government has far reaching implications on the life of people. The electricity they use, the

water their drink, the waste they dispense of and the roads they drive on are fully in the ambit of local government.

The intricate connections between local government and the regions they are responsible for means that maladministration, failing infrastructure, and misuse of municipal funds have consequences that immediately affect many people. In some cases it leads to minor inconvenience and in extreme cases, like Maluti-a-Phofung, it has a considerable adverse effect on the lives of residents and their ability to earn a livelihood.

Despite some efforts by the provincial and national governments to intervene according to the law, residents and businesses that operate in the area under Maluti-a-Phofung continue to be adversely affected. A thorough deep dive into this situation will help in identifying key issues that explicitly affect people in their everyday lives. Maluti-a-Phofung, as one of the worst run municipalities in South Africa with extreme political instability, serves as a microcosm for what happens at local government.

This is an issue that affects all South Africans. The failures of this municipality and the consequences residents face could happen in another place, affecting more people. The people on the ground, having lived these consequences, can give insights that overarching research can only cursorily refer to.

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Part two: Long-form Narrative

Maluti-a-Phofung: Where state failures comes at a price to residents

Chapter One: **‘There’s nothing here. It is dry’**

It is 6am in Snake Park informal settlement at the entrance of QwaQwa. The breeze from the nearby Drakensberg Mountain range is distinct.

The air is crisp. It has been three weeks with no running water in the area, but Nomaswazi Mkhaliphi is not shocked. The taps are dry as they often are, and there hasn’t been a water tanker in sight for days. It can never be predicted. She says the municipality, Maluti-a-Phofung, which governs the area across Harrismith, Kestell and Phuthaditjhaba, cannot be bothered.

Nomaswazi fetches a 20-litre bucket and two-litre bottle, walks down a steep path, climbs over rocks and heads towards a lone pipe. She passes by a green JoJo water tank, shrugging upon realising it is empty.

Usually, water tankers paid for by the municipality fill up the JoJo tanks so the community can access clean water. But, lately, corruption has taken root, and the water provided by the municipality is often sold to desperate residents. Some residents pay up to R400 to fill their own tanks. Most people in the area cannot afford to buy water daily - Nomaswazi certainly can’t. Also, the tankers are not consistent. Sometimes, they come once a week, and other times, they appear once a month.

Nomaswazi lives in a makeshift home made out of corrugated iron in an area of QwaQwa that has no running water, no electricity, and with no roads leading up to her home. Some residents live in houses built by the government, but Nomaswazi has never had a brick-and-mortar home.

Walking to the nearby source to fetch water is an everyday task in her life. A few dozen other residents have gathered at the tap at the end of a derelict pipe to gather water for the day. The tap doesn't always have water. When it is dry, residents rely on a body of water nearby, but that’s shared with animals in the area.

Is the water safe to drink, I ask. “We don’t know, but we don’t have a choice,” she responds.

The water crisis in the area are attributed to several things. Since December 2023, the nearby FikaPatso Dam dropped to 61% of its capacity. This means far less water is available to supply QwaQwa and its surrounding villages. Compounding the crisis is ageing municipal infrastructure - primarily linked to inefficiency and corruption in the municipality. Load shedding compounds the water situation, as it affects water treatment plants and reticulation. In other words, there is no end in sight for the water crisis.

A visit to the municipal offices in QwaQwa finds that it is without water too.

For R20, Nomaswazi can sometimes buy water that fills a 20-litre bucket. But most of the time she cannot afford it. The 30-year-old has lived in QwaQwa all her life. Born into poverty, she insists that life is getting harder, not easier. And for that, she lays blame directly at the door of the local municipality.

“We are struggling, as I’m living in that area, we are living in a shack. We don’t have electricity at all, we don’t have roads, we don’t have water, we need to wait for the JoJo tanks to give us some water, and maybe it can take some three weeks to come before they give us water. We are struggling,” she says.

Nomaswazi is among the 69% of municipality residents without piped water inside their dwellings. This means most of the community has to rely on communal taps, water tankers and nearby dams for their most basic human need.

Nomaswazi sums up life in Snake Park QwaQwa: “Life is tough, there’s a lot of poverty, we don’t have jobs. You can’t live inside the house without food and everything, even the kids, there are lots of kids here. They don’t even go to school because they suffer. You can’t go to school and then you come back, you find food. It won’t happen. You can’t live without food.

“But it's fine if you get the R350 (grant), you can buy mealie meal, potatoes, one cabbage, a small bottle of fish oil, Vaseline… everything you have to buy a small one, you can’t buy big things, but the R350 helps us.”

The mother of one has never had a job. It is not for the lack of trying. Once, the local councillor referred them to a place where the municipality was hiring, but it didn’t amount to much. Nomaswazi spends her days looking after her 5-year-old child, who goes to a government-run creche and relies entirely on the child support grant.

She is not an anomaly in the area. Many of her friends and peers don’t have jobs. “We don’t do anything. We don’t have jobs. We just sit around,” she tells me.

In areas like QwaQwa, which form part of the Maluti-a-Phofung municipality, unemployment sits at 41.8%, almost 10% more than the national rate. For the youth in the area, the picture is bleaker. Some 53% of young people in the area are unemployed.

Nomaswazi’s friend, Theresia Cheou, joins us for a drive through the area. She works as a street cleaner and at the dumpsite in QwaQwa as part of the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) programme. The EPWP is one of the government’s key programmes aimed at providing poverty and income relief through temporary work for the unemployed.

Theresia earns R1 150 from the state, which allows her to buy basic food. “It is not enough, but what must we do?” she asks.

Theresia is better off than many of her friends and neighbours who rely solely on a R350 grant from the government given to unemployed people in South Africa. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the government has implemented the Social Relief from Distress (SRD) grant aimed at helping unemployed and vulnerable South Africans. Around 10 million unemployed South Africans benefit from an R350 per month grant that has been extended beyond the period of the pandemic

Civil society organisations have said the R350 grant is far too little and isn't reaching enough people who should qualify for relief.

NGO Black Sash conducted research into the effects of the SRD grant and found that for many low-income recipients, the grant was so small that it could only be used to pay for basic services, like water or electricity, which should be free.

In comparison to global poverty levels, R350 amounts to less than $20 and is far less than the international benchmark of extreme poverty which constitutes people who subsist on less than $2.50 a day.

When she accesses her grant, Nomaswazi must buy paraffin to cook with because she has no electricity. Some days, she is forced to pay for water. She also has to walk long distances to the commercial hub of QwaQwa because she can seldom afford taxis to fetch her grants and buy the food she needs to survive. She dreads the moment when her paraffin runs out, and she has to collect wood from nearby trees to cook. "We go and get wood and cook. All of us have to do it," she says. This is because the area is mountainous and carrying wood on her head for a long walk home is an arduous task.

Only people who have money can afford to pay R450 for water, they tell me. Nomaswazi and Theresia cannot afford it.

"Where are we going to get money to pay for water that is supposed to be free from the municipality," Theresia asks. Tankers paid for by the municipality come around the community, but only fill up the tanks of those who pay privately for the water. "It is corruption," both women say.

While water is a major crisis in the area, QwaQwa also faces persistent electricity outages. On the one hand, many informal dwellings are not connected to the electrical grid. Conversely, the municipality's failure to pay power utility Eskom has resulted in persistent load reduction, leaving the community without electricity for hours.

Compounding years of non-payment of bulk electricity, the municipality is Eskom's worst debtor, owing it in the region of R7 billion. As a result, electricity to the area is often restricted. Compounding their woes is regular load shedding, the regular rolling blackouts implemented by Eskom.

Nomaswazi sighs. Life in QwaQwa is hard. She shrugs her shoulders. It is clear that she has lost hope.

Theresia, on the other hand, is angry about life in QwaQwa. "Look how beautiful this area is, but it is so dirty at the same time," she says as she looks into the picturesque distance. She says bad leaders have allowed the town to deteriorate into economic ruin. "I don't want to lie; we don't think we have a government here," she says of the local municipality.

A functioning local government would provide basic services to residents, she says. Water? It is hardly available, and when it is, there are concerns around its quality. Electricity? Consistent supply is a pipe dream.

"Almost all of us in the area cook on paraffin stoves. When you don't have money, you must go down to the trees to get wood to cook," Theresia explains.

Flushing toilets? It is a luxury for residents in the area. "Where will you get water to flush that toilet?" What about refuse collection, I ask her. She laughs. "Try calling the municipality for something. They will come after weeks! That is if they come at all."

Theresia points to a single clinic that is unable to service the needs of the entire community. It has resolved to categorise patients according to age so that doctors see old people on a set day, young women on another, and children on another.

At around mid-morning, I fetch Nomaswazi and Theresia at a school at the entrance of QwaQwa and we drive to an area which was once an industrial hub. They want to show me the decay in parts of the area I would have not found myself. Mandela Park used to house

factories manufacturing shoes, clothes, and toilet paper, among other things. Now, barely any factories operate in the area.

“People are hungry inside QwaQwa. It is dry,” Theresia says as we drive through the town.

Nomaswazi recalls that her parents used to work as labourers in these factories. Now, they barely operate. Theresia wants to show me the industrial area to prove that economic activity in the town has slowed down. “There’s no jobs here,” she says.

Theresia understands why companies would not want to operate in the area. The lack of constant water supply, unpredictable electricity outages and unmaintained roads make it clear to her why companies sought to move away. The Mandela Park industrial area was once a bustling area for employment it no longer resembles that.

Thirty kilometres away, in Harrismith, regarded as the more affluent part of the municipality, Jan Moore expresses his love for the town he was born in, as well as an equal frustration over the failures that make life difficult.

For 10 years, he lived in Johannesburg, but in 2016, he moved back to pursue his business as a chartered accountant and, later, as an owner of a bed and breakfast called Tom’s Place. His wife runs the business while he focuses on his accounting practice. For him, Harrismith should be a booming town because of its geography. It is primely located on the N3 route between Durban and Johannesburg, making it ideal for business. The area is lush, he says, and the vistas picturesque.

According to Jan, there is no reason why life in this town should not be idyllic. But the failures of government, particularly the municipality that governs the areas, make life unbearable at times, according to him.

Staying at Tom's Place, you can tell that clean drinking water is measured and in short supply. A cup of water is neatly measured per guest for their morning coffee. Clean drinkable water is a luxury and the thought of pouring stale coffee down the drain seems unthinkable.

The carport of Tom's Place has been replaced with solar panels- making it energy-efficient. I notice the garden is dotted with green JoJo tanks. Jan's capital investment in becoming energy efficient and non-reliant on the municipality has given his business an advantage. But it is something he had to do to keep operating. Businesses have to become completely independent of municipality services in order to function.

Jan says businesses are doing everything they can to survive despite the municipality's failures. "It's small things like that, but it affects the whole business environment. Some of the people are more negatively influenced by this now. In September 2022, when we had a two-week outage, I went and spent a hell of a lot of money putting up solar so that it just doesn't affect my business," he says.

"But I mean, the next guy just doesn't do it. And now he has to run a generator for six hours. Now, you can imagine how much that adds to a company's overhead. It just gets so difficult to keep on doing business. Because now you have to raise your prices, but on the other hand, are you still being competitive with the whole market? If you have to lift your prices just to cover your costs."

For Jan, he can track the decay of the town to 2010. This was shortly before the now-ousted ANC mayor, Vusi Shabalala, was elected. "You could see, this town started to deteriorate month on month. In 2010, it was fine. I mean, you didn't drive from pothole to pothole. I won't say there was nothing, but it was a drivable town. The stormwater drains were there, and electricity infrastructure was there," he says.

Now, Harrismith's roads are riddled with potholes, and the main roads in the town resemble gravel streets. The water quality has completely deteriorated, and residents cannot drink water from their taps. Refuse collection is a luxury, and any empty ground has been transformed into a dumping site.

A power outage for two weeks straight in September 2022 was enough to have residents fuming with rage. Infuriated by the lack of electricity, they gathered in protest. Residents say it was an incident of sabotage at the local sub-station that led to economic ruin for more than 10 days. Jan says that the incident had a devastating impact on his business.

“In September 2022, we had sabotage. We were told that at the main sub-station of the town, we were without electricity for two weeks. Nobody came to town. There were no guests at my guesthouse. Now, obviously, I'm affected, but now you can think the rest of the business community if nobody for two weeks is coming to your town to do business, it affects you longer. It's a permanent loss,” he says.

“Some of it you might maybe make up later on, but most of it is a permanent loss to the local economy. Then last year, one of the big situations was in October, when we were two weeks without water. Now, given it was before the rain started, it was extremely poor planning from the municipality. The main waterway, where most of the water comes from, was full of branches, trees, etc.”

The power outage in 2022 led to home baker Nazeera Hansa leading the community in protest outside the municipality's offices. Her dad was active in the community, and Nazeera says she had no choice but to organise residents who were all going through similar pain. She organised a WhatsApp group, spoke to local councillors and was part of organising a march to the municipality where a memorandum of demands was delivered.

Eighteen months later, Nazeera is not optimistic about change in the town she has always called home.

“One evening I just went on the group and I said, ‘hi guys, like, what's happening, what are we gonna do about this crisis?’ And then one guy just shut me down immediately. He said you only look for us when there's a problem. But then a lot of other people just said that this is the time when we need to come together. And then we started like sharing the link to the group and, you know, and the next morning there were like 500 to 600 people,” she says.

“We had to start a second group. And then I organised a public meeting and we came together and we decided that we were going to do a peaceful march to the municipal building, and demand that the mayor sign a memorandum. The mayor didn't come, but he sent his officials. The next day the electricity was restored. So that's how I came into working with the community whenever we faced issues to help find out what the problems were.”

When things go wrong in Maluti-a-Phofung, it is impossible to rely on councillors to get a full picture of what’s going on, Nazeera says. As a result, she goes to technical employees and pleads with municipality officials to update the community whenever there are electrical faults or water outages.

“We had to do the work of the council. And yeah, so that's how I started working with the community and, ever since, I mean, it hasn't been smooth sailing. We still have issues weekly. It is affecting our livelihood,” she says.

Unlike the rest of the country, where load shedding adheres to a schedule when power is switched off in Harrismith, residents are in the dark about when it will be restored. Water in taps is not safe to drink and residents are forced to purchase drinking water.

“When we have load shedding, like when we're on stage four and stage six load shedding, then they do not pump water from the pump stations because the pump station does not have a generator. So then there'll be two or three days that we don't have water. Again, you have to buy water to run your business. You have to buy water to cook and bath and whatever because they don't supply water trucks in the town unless you have to struggle to get the councillors to send a water truck,” Nazeera says.

In 2022, Auditor-General Tsakani Maluleke noted that all seven wastewater treatment works in the municipality had "collapsed" due to a combination of poor management, theft, and vandalism. This means wastewater that leaves residents homes in the sewerage system is

left untreated and, as a result, contaminates nearby dams and rivers. This contaminated water is then piped into residents homes.

In September 2023, residents of the town of 30 00 people, struggled without water for 15 days. Jan relied on nearby farmers who provided water to the town. Nazeera had resorted to contacting an NGO to provide water tankers because the municipality could not be bothered. And even if there is water, she says, no one feels safe drinking it.

“No one feels safe drinking water, even if they say they said that the water has been tested and whatever, but they've never given us proof that it's safe to drink,” she adds.

Adding to the woes of life under the Maluti-a-Phofung municipality, Nazeera says roads in the area have become deadly. “We're not safe because on our roads, we don't have street lights, the entrances and the exits to the township do not have street lights. Our town itself doesn't have street lights. You can't call what we have potholes because they're not potholes.”

For the last two years, Nazeera has tried to organise the community in an effort to put pressure on the municipality. But she is not holding her breath.

“You know, I think as much as we try to bring the community together, we are still very divided. So, I don't think it's been impactful as such. It's just that we tried to hold the municipality accountable, but it doesn't really work,” she says.

“It's like, even after we handed over the memorandum, and we obviously had meetings with them, and there were promises, but nothing had been delivered upon.”

At the same time, residents and businesses have to deal with rubbish-lined streets. Less than 25% of households in the municipality have access to weekly refuse removal, and that, too, the municipality fails to service. Often, municipal dumpster trucks are inoperable. Municipal staff shrug their shoulders at the heaps of garbage piled all over town.

I drive by the municipal offices and see piles of rubbish on the left-hand side of the entrance. Locals appear unfazed. During a week-long visit to the town, I find that only one police station services all of Harrismith. The local clinic in QwaQwa is completely overstretched. Residents are turned away an masse because medical staff cannot cope with the demand. And there is only one fire brigade for the entire area. The municipal hall is completely vandalised. The grass surrounding municipal offices is overgrown. There was not a single streetlight in the town that worked during my stay there.

The experiences of four residents living in different areas under the Maluti-a-Phofung municipality and across income brackets have one thing in common: the municipality has and continues to fail to deliver basic services. Their account of life in the dysfunctional municipality is backed up by the office of the Auditor-General, which has tracked the financial ruin of the municipality for more than a decade.

While the dysfunction is hard to miss, and the quality of life is adversely affected by the lack of basic services, I ask the locals I speak to: can the situation change?

For Nomaswazi, change doesn't look possible. "There's not much we can do. We hope and pray, but I don't see this government changing."

For Theresia, getting involved in party politics is what makes her hopeful. She says a change in government is what she's hoping would improve the conditions of people in the area.

For Jan, taking functions away from the municipality and allowing private entities to deliver services is his immediate hope. He pays a local organisation to pick up his refuse, and he has little hope that politics can turn things around in the town.

For Nazeerah, the only hope is a complete overhaul of the municipality so that Harrismith is its own municipality, and its affairs are handled better. She is hopeful that submissions made to the municipal demarcation board will change how local government administration is handled in the area. "I don't believe it's going to change," she says of politics.

Chapter Two: 'We have to do things ourselves'

Driving into Harrismith on a Thursday afternoon, two men in overalls smile at me as they fill massive potholes with tar. It is a blazing afternoon and the town is busy. There's a bakkie parked nearby seemingly belonging to H.I.T. suggesting that it was workers from the residents' association who were tasked to fill the potholes.

The roads in Harrismith are pockmarked with all sizes of potholes. The main roads in and out of the town show apparent signs of lack of maintenance. It doesn't appear that roads in the area are maintained at all. Driving along the main road to my bed and breakfast, it is almost impossible to avoid a pothole. As I pass the H.I.T workers filling potholes, I see and hear other motorists hoot in acknowledgment of their efforts, and in thanks for it.

H.I.T, I find out, stands for Harrismith, Intabazwe and Tshiame - all nearby areas that previously made up the broader Harrismith area. On the 1 March 2020, residents in the area came together and formed a non-profit organisation aimed at advocating for their interests and for the common good of the community. For two years prior to the formation of H.I.T, community activists and local businesspeople tried engaging with the municipality to find common ground on the problems that were persisting - with no response from officials.

They had taken things into their own hands, paying for repairing broken pipes and installing valves at water treatment plants with private funds. The relationship between the community and municipal officials soured so badly that residents blocked a water treatment plan to protect it from alleged sabotage from officials. They believed that corrupt officials were purposely sabotaging municipal infrastructure to benefit from the kickbacks of repair contracts.

I meet Wilhem Konig at the entrance of Harrismith, close to where HIT staff were filling potholes. He is the organisation's chairperson and has worked in Ernest to force the municipality to provide basic services. I ask him about the men who were filling potholes earlier.

“Those are our guys. We do everything. We fill potholes. We cut grass. We clean up dumping sites,” he tells me with a sense of pride.

Wilhelm is a fulltime businessman but has dedicated his time to running HIT. The organisation was formed, he says, “due to the neglect of the municipality not being able to perform in the area”. He makes it clear upfront that “service delivery does not exist in this municipality”. This is why residents have to “do things for ourselves”, he says.

Konig leads the organisation that has recruited around 400 households, all contributing R100 a month. Some weeks, HIT employs people to fill potholes. On other weeks, they cut trees so the branches do not affect the overhanging electricity cables. For the most part, HIT collects refuse on a Thursday and a Friday in the area after residents complained of years of unreliable service from the municipality.

Municipal dumpster trucks are a rare sight in Harrismith and illegal dump sites have become the norm. Wilhelm says they began collecting refuse weekly when residents became concerned about the public health risk of uncollected trash. But they soon realised that their services needed to expand to other functions of the municipality.

“We render a service to anybody if the sewages are blocked; we don’t do it just for a member, the pothole that’s been fixed there, who uses this road, everybody or just HIT members? So this is done for the community,” Wilhelm says.

As things stand, only 400 of 3 500 households in the area pay for HIT services. Wilhelm says, with only 10% of the community paying a meagre R100, they can do more than the municipality.

“When drains are blocked, we get a private plumber to unblock drains that the municipality failed to sort out. We will do it privately after we’ve sent them letters to open the drains. We will get an account, pay the plumber, and recoup the money from the municipality,” he explains. He says residents cannot account for what the municipality does.

“We can’t tell you what they are doing. They plant a tree here where 60 people are standing. They show off about one tree planted and one pothole filled. I can take you to town where they filled potholes, and I’ll show the difference between what we’ve done and what they’ve done. We are doing it on a professional level.”

The conflict between HIT and the municipality was exacerbated in February 2022 when the municipality cut the electricity supply of various businesses in the area without any notice. The municipality claimed that the businesses, which included the local Spar grocery store and the Engen fuel garage, were in arrears with their municipal accounts.

The Free State High Court in Bloemfontein ruled in 2022 that the municipality did not act lawfully when it cut off the businesses' electricity without prior warning.

“I merely wish to point out that although consumers can utilise generators for short periods at an excessive cost when their electricity supply is cut during power outages experienced from time to time, they have made out a clear case, which was in any event not disputed, that electricity as a basic municipal service has become virtually indispensable, bearing in mind the type of businesses conducted,” the court ruled.

HIT does not only take on the local authorities in pursuit of a well-run town. At one time, corporate companies were dumping refuse across the town. Wilhelm, angered by this, gathered the refuse and dumped it inside their stores.

“I will not allow them to dump in the streets,” he said.

On my first visit to the town, HIT was in the process of taking the municipality to court for a ruling that would allow residents to pay HIT for refuse removal as a result of the municipality’s inability. However, a month later, Wilhem explained that they had engaged the municipality, which agreed to clean up the dump site, repair the roads, and cut trees. The municipality also agreed not to suspend electricity services to HIT members.

Living in Harrismith and surrounding areas, residents are forced to do the work of government. Local farmers provide water during extended water outages. Business owners cut the trees in the town to avoid electrical outages. Pastor and PR councillor from the Freedom Front Plus, Charl Kramer, says Harrismith survives despite its bad government. He says that in the 18 years he has stayed in the town, he has observed a “can do” attitude among residents.

“If something is broken, we try and fix it, you know, we jump in. You know, Harrismith is really a great little town. People are positive, you know, but when it comes to the municipality, they're negative towards the municipality,” he says.

Charl detailed how private guys fixed a vehicle of the municipality free of charge to ensure services were not interrupted. During the September 2022 power outage, he says, big businesses worked together to fix the problem. “The guys from Nestle jumped in. Other local businesses helped, too.”

He says the problem plaguing the Maluti-a-Phofung municipality is a lack of adequate management and lack of leadership. He joined politics because he grew tired of complaining from the sidelines. “

You know, I’ve always been the type of guy, you know, not to sit on the pavilion and shout to the guys playing the game. I get into the game, and I play the game and see what the rules are about. So, I really hope that by entering the council and entering politics, I can help a bit.”

Charl has found that the systems of local government are complicated: “Sometimes to fix something, they go through procurement processes where are necessary. But to complete it you need six or eight signatures. If one person is absent for two weeks, for whatever reason, that service can’t be procured. And the residents are not told why.”

For Charl, much like Theresia, a change in politics can change the lives of the residents of Maluti-a-Phofung. But for Wilhelm, he has no interest in politics. His main goal is to get more members to make his organisation sustainable. But he says they face resistance from other local bodies also wanting to challenge the municipality.

“They all pull in different directions, instead of all forming one group and taking them head-on. Now, you sit with six different groups. One’s got 30 members, the other one’s got 15 members, and we are the strongest one in town at this point in time, but people don’t want to work with us,” he notes. He doesn’t favour one party over another, but is determined to hold the municipality accountable on behalf of its residents.

Local DA councillor Allison Oates says residents don’t have a choice but to pay privately for services. “It only works for the people who can afford R100 a month,” she says.

In her best-case scenario, the municipality should be able to provide clean, drinkable water and uninterrupted electricity, provide refuse collection, keep the town clean and ensure the roads are driveable. “It is very much at a crises point,” she says of the municipality.

Is there any hope for a recovery? I ask. She pauses. She takes a sip of her water. “There has to be.” Without HIT, she admits, rubbish would not be collected in the area.

“We have had one compactor which has been out of operation since about May last year, which means people's refuse get removed once a week instead of twice a week. And the person managing the contractor in charge of the two rubbish dumps left at the beginning of December (2023),” Allison says.

She warns that privatising services meant to be delivered by the municipality, does not solve the crux of the problem. She says while she is encouraged by residents taking things into their own hands, such systems don’t work in nearby QwaQwa, “because people can’t afford it”.

Her concerns are echoed by ANC councillor and incumbent Speaker Mandlankosi Dlamini, who says when residents do not pay the municipality for services, it adds to persisting financial unsustainability.

I arrive at the Maluti-a-Phofung municipal offices early on Friday to meet with Mandlankosi. Heaps of rubbish are piled outside the municipal officers, and the grass outside is overgrown. A member of the public visiting the municipal offices takes a straw broom and sweeps the entrance of the building while she waits. Other members of the public sit on the stairs, waiting to be served.

Mandlankosi, who was elected in November after a motion of no confidence in the previous speaker and mayor, appears to be popular among municipal staff. We sit in a stuffy office early in the morning before he is obliged to attend a community meeting. He immediately admits to the problems in the municipality. “The current situation of the municipality, it’s very bad. It’s very bad, I don’t want to lie, it’s very bad,” he says.

Mandlankosi was an official in the municipality in the early 2000s and became a ward councillor in 2018. He says while he understands the urgency of residents to fix the problems in the municipality, they are layered and deep. He tracks the problems of the municipality to its formation in 2000 when four local authorities, which were referred to as Transitional Local Councils, were amalgamated to form Maluti-a-Phofung municipality. He says that merging former Bantustans or homelands like QwaQwa and Phuthaditjhaba with Harrismith and Kestell is at the core of the faltering municipality.

“In QwaQwa, people never paid for services. Now we have created this municipality and we think everyone will pay for services. It didn’t work,” he says.

Is the municipality bankrupt? I ask him. “Yes,” he nods. The municipality has been unable to collect revenue for the rare services it does provide and, as a result, relies on grants from provincial and national government to stay afloat. Despite this, for Dlamini, organisations like HIT contribute to the persisting failures.

“The municipality will have trucks going around taking refuse at the end of the day. Then the money is not coming to the municipality, but the money goes to them as the ratepayers’ associations and they are not taking it back to the municipality. There are hiccups sometimes when the truck doesn’t come this week, but it will. At the end of the day the money is paid to the ratepayers’ association and then the ratepayers do not transfer that money back to the municipality,” Mandlankosi says.

“How are they expecting the municipality to function? How are they expecting the municipality to render better because we can’t maintain even our fleet because there’s no revenue.”

Wilhelm hits back, saying the ANC was disingenuous because they misappropriated taxpayers’ money for years and did not provide services in return. “They can’t blame us for their failures,” he says.

Chapter three: The price of politics

Pharatlane Motloung was part of the ANC in Maluti-a-Phofung when he decided he could no longer stand the party's defence of then-mayor Vusi Tshabalala. Tshabalala was running the municipality to ruin, and the ANC was complicit in protecting him, Motloung says. Having served as the mayor since 2013, Tshabalala was pinned as the face of the municipality's maladministration, corruption, and inefficiency by the opposition and the community alike.

In five years, municipal services had deteriorated, corruption became rampant, and the municipal coffers had dried up. Since 2013, the municipality has simply stopped paying Eskom for a bulk supply of electricity even when residents paid the municipality. In ten years, Maluti-a-Phofung would become one of the worst debtors to Eskom, owing the power utility of more than R7 billion.

In 2018, the community of QwaQwa and surrounding areas grew frustrated at persisting service delivery failures. They organised protests against the municipality, which turned

violent and later deadly. The frustration of the community was palatable and the protest eventually led to one person was shot as shops were looted and infrastructure damaged.

Residents had a single demand: consequences for Mayor Vusi Tshabalala. However, beyond condemning the protests, the ANC took little action. Instead, they sought to close ranks around Tshabalala on two occasions when the opposition brought a motion of no confidence against him in the council.

A motion of no confidence is a tool employed to formally express dissatisfaction with an elected official. When it goes to a vote, the elected official can be removed if they do not secure more than 50% of the vote. The ANC has long barred its councillors, members of legislatures and members of Parliament from ever siding with the opposition during votes. There are harsher consequences for those who diverge from the collective vote than for those who are charged with corruption.

The group of 16 councillors sought to plead with the ANC to rethink its blind support for Mayor Tshabalala. “The 16 councillors tried to engage the leadership of the ANC about Vusi Tshabalala, that things were not working out in the municipality. He needed to be removed. But the leadership did not really heed our call,” Pharatlane said.

Regardless of the growing list of accusations, Tshabalala was protected by the ANC provincial leadership. Finally, the group of 16 ANC councillors decided they had no choice but to side with the opposition to remove Tshabalala as mayor. They took a gamble, in the interest of the municipality, aware of the personal consequences to follow.

“But before anyone could be voted out, the ANC decided to recall him, and they wanted to put somebody else, but they would impose from the ANC as well. But the 16 ANC councillors believed that the ANC would be elect a stooge of Tshabalala and it would not make a difference,” Pharatlane said.

The eventual removal of Tshabalala as mayor was seen through two prisms. Firstly, it was seen as a response to ANC factionalism, where the reigning faction of the ANC loyal to

President Cyril Ramaphosa agreed to remove party leaders and representatives who had not supported him and his allies to take over the ANC in December 2017 during the party's internal elections. Later, Tshabalala insisted that he was removed as mayor simply because of his political allegiance to former ANC Free State strongman and secretary-general Ace Magashule. Intra-party dynamics often play a greater role in the removal of public representatives than a service delivery consideration.

Secondly, the ANC was aware that, given the failures of governance in Maluti-a-Phofung, it needed to appear to respond to the community's concerns. Less than a year before the general elections in 2019, the party was mindful that it had to appear to be dealing with allegations of impropriety and lack of efficient governance against the mayor. By the time Tshabalala left, the municipality had failed to deliver services and was unable to pay employees their salaries, pension funds, medical aid, and other third-party expenses. It owed the water board more than R200 million at the time.

But his recall as mayor was not political punishment for Tshabalala who was described by the Democratic Alliance as "the former mayor who had conducted a reign of terror and brought Maluti-a-Phofung to its knees financially". He went on to take a serious role in the ANC in the Free State provincial legislature. And those within the ANC who dared to side with the opposition to remove him faced a harsher punishment.

By the time Tshabalala had left office, there were several accusations of corruption that included misappropriating grant funding, electricity revenue, and disaster funds.

In an effort to deal with that period in question, in a proclamation, President Cyril Ramaphosa asked the Special Investigating Unit (SIU) in 2020 to look into Maluti-a-Phofung affairs since 2012 and investigate a range of wrong doing.

Following Tshabalala's recall, the group of rebel councillors threw their weight behind councillor Gilbert Mokotso as the mayor, but the ANC would not have it. The group was first

suspended in 2018 and later expelled from the ANC for daring to defy the party line, even when they argued they were against malfeasance.

By December 2018, the ANC had read their councillors the riot act, and they were ousted from the council. After the ANC kicked out 16 councillors for committing the “cardinal sin” of siding with the opposition in pursuit of removing an ANC mayor, the councillors all registered as independent candidates and contested by-elections in the wards in which had they previously represented the ANC.

Ten months later, 10 of the councillors were re-elected to council after contesting as independent councillors. “The former ANC councillors were elected as independent candidates and then decided to launch a political party called MaP-16 that would contest the 2021 municipal elections,” Motloung said.

The move was seen as bold because Maluti-a-Phofung and the Free State had always been an ANC stronghold. Since the formation of the municipality, the ANC has held a majority in Maluti-a-Phofung. In 2000, it gained 51 seats of a total of 69 in the council. In 2006, it gained more support and was allocated 55 seats. In 2011, the ANC had 52 seats; but in 2016, dropped to 47 seats with 68 % of support.

When MaP-16 was launched first as a civic movement, and later as a political party, ahead of the 2021 municipal elections, the ANC was dismissive of it. The party regarded it as yet another political formation launched by dissatisfied former ANC members. But as the elections drew closer, the ANC sought to extend an olive branch to the dismissed councillors.

"Bad decisions were taken. Mistakes were committed. We had to accept that and apologise for that," ANC spokesperson Oupa Khoabane reportedly said at the time.

MaP-16 focused their campaign on an anti-corruption stance, leveraging their popularity in and around QwaQwa to garner support. It became evident to the ANC that their decision to shun party councillors who were resisting corruption would cost the party amid growing disillusionment in the ANC. In October 2021, President Ramaphosa travelled to the area to

convince the community to vote for the ANC. But residents heckled and booed the president amid complaints of persisting water cuts, ongoing electricity outages and dismal service delivery.

"His [Ramaphosa's] party has failed us in this town, and we want to make that known to him. We want to hear what he will do to the failing leaders and don't care much about the apologies cause those don't really do much in terms of changing the conditions that we are being subjected to," 72-year-old Joseph Mokoena told News24 at the time.

By then, the ANC had realised it was facing stiff rejection from the area once regarded as its stronghold. Ramaphosa - leading the party's campaign efforts - apologised for the wrongs of ANC local representative and insisted that "this would not be repeated".

When residents took to the ballot in November 2021, their anger against the ANC was palpable . The ANC faced a stunning decline, losing support - from 68% of the vote to 38%. A decline of 20 percentage points in a single MaP-16 outperformed many expectations, garnering 28.5% of votes, which led to them gaining 20 seats in the council.

While the ANC did not have a majority to govern, it was still the largest party in the council. The ANC's support declined from 47 to 28 seats. Emboldened by the unexpected support, MaP-16 formed a coalition government with the EFF, the Dikwankwetla Party, African Transformation Movement, African Independent Congress and the South African Royal Kingdoms Organisation. The Democratic Alliance and Freedom Front Plus did not join the coalition, but supported the block to take control of the municipality.

After the coalition was negotiated, Gilbert Mokotso was elected as the first non-ANC mayor in the municipality, and Motloung was elected as speaker.

"The ANC faced a massive drop (in support) because people had really lost confidence in the ANC. And I can argue that the confidence in the ANC is still very low in the area. So, I think our coming to the political stage was at the right time. And also we definitely spoke the language that the people wanted to hear," Motloung said of their electoral gain in the 2021 poll.

Unseating the ANC and relegating them to the opposition benches was the easiest part for the MaP-16-led coalition in Maluti-a-Phofung. They soon realised that governing with a seven-party coalition was harder than expected. There were no quick fixes to the systemic problems in the municipality that was battling bankruptcy.

For the ANC in the area, MaP-16's victory in Maluti-a-Phofung "hindered service delivery" - worse than under the ANC government. "It was pure corruption, it was pure corruption," the ANC's Dlamini said of it at the time.

But how can councillors who were expelled from the ANC for condemning corruption be guilty of the charge of corruption, I asked Dlamini. He dug in. "Yes, they were expelled from the ANC because they were against corruption, but corruption was the order of the day (under MaP-16). If you can check, there's a lot of issues that we can raise, like for example, on the 23rd of November 2021 when they were inaugurated, we had an investment of almost R100 million by December or January… we had no money. We had zero," said Dlamini, accusing MaP-16 of going on a "spending spree" when taking office.

"You know what is a paying spree? They were paying everything. If you came with an invoice and said I'm being owed, I did your job in 2020 or 2015, I was not paid, and then they paid you. They were not following the supply chain processes," Dlamini said.

He further accused MaP-16 of using deviations in the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA), which is meant to be used in emergencies to procure goods and services. Dlamini further asserted that the sabotage of the sub-station that led to a two-week outage in September 2022 was motivated by corruption.

The ANC's version was corroborated by an unusual ally in the DA. Allison Oates said life in Maluti-a-Phofung became worse for residents under MaP-16, even though the DA helped them get elected.

“MaP-16 was very bad. It was worse than the ANC,” Allison said. She pointed to the electricity issues in the area as not being addressed. She said “people with the right connections” had tenders to supply water tankers to communities. “It was a situation that was benefitting a few people, but doing badly for the government.” The DA councillor was clear: “MaP-16 was far worse than the ANC”. Her comments were echoed later by Theresia in QwaQwa who said even though the majority of MaP-16 councillors came from the area, there was very little to show for it.

Pharatlane became visibly annoyed by the assertion that governance under MaP-16 was worse than under the ANC government. “There's no truth to that whatsoever. That’s pure propaganda due to politicking, I guess,” he said. For 18 months, Motloung said, the MaP-16-led coalition worked in earnest to negotiate with Eskom over the staggering municipal debt. “We realised we could not resolve the electricity problem on our own,” he added.

He pointed to an increase in revenue collection from residents during their tenure as an example of their success. He disputed the ANC and the DA’s assertion that the water crisis got worse under MaP-16.

“There’s no truth to that,” Motloung said of the ANC’s accusation of the “spending spree” that took place in the municipality after MaP-16 took over. From June 2023, the ANC sought to institute a motion of no confidence in MaP-16’s mayor Gilbert Mokotso, speaker Paratlane Motloung and Moeketsi Lebesa who is the chief whip of the council and the leader of the Dikwankwetla Party of South Africa. In the notice of the motion, the ANC’s Dlamini alleged that the mayor had “donated the municipality to convicted criminals”.

“The level of corruption and looting is high since he [Mokotso] took office. He is the one who is running the municipal purse. The mayor has failed to monitor the management of the municipality administration in accordance with the direction of the municipal council. He has failed to oversee the provision of municipal services to communities in a sustainable manner, but he opts for interference. The mayor has failed within two years to prioritise the needs of this municipality… and ensure the provision of basic services such as water and electricity,” said Mandlankosi Dlamini in his letter to the speaker at the time.

After speaking to a wide array of people inside the council and in the community, I found that under MaP-16, basic services had ground to a halt because the municipality did not pay the salaries of workers. The budget passed was unfunded, which meant the municipality planned to spend money it did not have. Despite promises to fix the billing system, by 2023 no change was made. The municipality was in debt of more than R10 billion, which reached crisis point when a sheriff from Harrismith went to the municipality's offices and placed municipal vehicles and other items under judicial attachment, in an effort to recover money owed by the municipality.

Residents told me the worst electricity crisis persisted under MaP-16. While the genesis of the municipality's problems preceded MaP-16, many believed that their time in office exacerbated the crisis.

Eighteen months after MaP-16 made history by taking votes away from the ANC, ensuring its electoral decline and relegating them to the opposition benches in Maluti-a-Phofung, they were dealt a wildcard. A motion of no confidence was finally passed in the mayor and the speaker, toppling the coalition government that had been in place since November 2021. The DA in the council was determined that it could no longer support the MaP-16 coalition.

"We regrettably knew that if we support the motion to remove MAP16, the ANC would be elected in, but we thought that would be better," Oates said. The Freedom Front Plus was more sympathetic to MaP-16, saying they were not given enough time to prove themselves. "There were some things that were fixable with MAP16. I think they needed time to fix it. But there were many issues politically, you know, so, they struggled to get the ball rolling," Kramer reflected.

In November 2023, after two failed efforts to call a motion of no confidence, the ANC was successful in removing MaP-16 from office. But soon after successfully giving their political enemies the boot, in-fighting took hold about who should be the ANC's mayor. The party decided to elect an "interim" mayor, Masechaba Mosia Lakaje, who was the mayor from 2019 until 2021.

The decision to redeploy Lakaje as mayor was seen as a “political own goal”, with the DA telling me they were uninspired by her leadership and MaP-16 saying Lekaje was exactly what voters sought to vote out in 2021. The council elected Dlamini as speaker, and he insisted that a turn-around of the municipality was imminent.

“Yes, things are bad, but now we have a plan. We have a plan,” he sought to reassure me.

Chapter four: Is there any hope?

The Phuthaditjhaba Labour Centre is near the municipal offices in the area. Every day, people queue up to the offices to apply and follow up on applications for their Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) amid the ongoing closures of factors in the Industria Park of QwaQwa. So acute is the situation that the Minister of Employment and Labour Thulas Nxesi told Parliament in 2023 that the Phuthaditjhaba Labour Centre cannot cope with the number of UIF applications.

UIF is meant to give short-term relief to workers when they become unemployed or are unable to work because of maternity, adoption, parental leave, or illness. But, because of an administrative nightmare, recently unemployed workers are unable to access the fund. This compounds an already dire situation in an area where, among the 400 000 residents, 70% are unemployed, according to the Census.

In conversations with politicians, businessmen and ordinary residents, everyone concurred that the economic woes of Maluti-a-Phofung are getting worse, as businesses are opting to shut down. Dlamini, as the speaker, has a front-row seat on how the lack of service delivery is contributing to rapid economic decline, which has resulted in the municipality becoming increasingly financially nonviable. With fewer jobs, fewer residents can pay for service, he explained.

I found out that the municipality has a collection rate of 11%. This means only 11% of the households that get water and electricity and refuse collection from the municipality pay for the services they receive.

“The town is deteriorating. The town is also starting to deteriorate because big companies are starting to move out. If we can’t sustain the issue of electricity, the issue of water, those big companies move and then our local communities become poorer because there’s no jobs,” Dlamini explained. The DA concurred. “Companies don’t want to invest in the area because there’s no stable electricity supply, we often don’t have water, and the roads and infrastructure is crumbling,” Oates said.

Edwin Claasen has been running an abattoir in Harrismith since 1998, where he slaughters and sells cattle and sheep. In 2023, he made the painful decision to shut down the business because of persistent load shedding and water problems.

“It was very difficult to keep going,” he said of the conditions. Persistent electricity blackouts and long periods without water made it difficult for him to continue his business. “I tried for two years not to shut down the business, but we had to,” Claasen told me.

His business was profitable for well over 20 years, but municipality failures forced his hand. “They could not sort out the water and electricity problem,” he said. When the abattoir shut down, 79 jobs were immediately affected. Claasen said that around 100 people eventually lost their jobs. This affected around 400 to 500 people living in the area. He hopes to reopen business should he secure an export permit, but he doubts the municipality will have sorted out the persisting woes that forced him to shut his business.

In all the conversations I had with residents during my time in the area, they mentioned the failures of the Maluti-a-Phofung Special Economic Zone (SEZ) to create meaningful employment. On further probing, I found that in 2017, former president Jacob Zuma launched a SEZ just outside of Harrismith that was aimed at incentivising businesses to set up factories in the area. The Maluti-A-Phofung SEZ was set up in 2014 and was promoted as a perfectly situated mid-point between Durban and Johannesburg.

Government had big dreams for manufacturers to open factories by offering tax incentives of 15% instead of 28% corporate tax, and other perks to accelerate job creation in the city. At the time, government said there was an investment pipeline of R2.6 billion, with the minister

at the time, Rob Davies, saying there was R1 billion investment in the area. Government said at the time that this would translate into thousands of jobs.

From the outside, it is difficult to tell what productivity is taking place inside factories situated in the Special Economic Zone, but by the look of it, it doesn't seem like much. I could not find data on how many jobs have since been created, but the opposition in the area says a mere 167 jobs have been created in the past 10 years in the area.

Any expectation for job creation in the area is pinned on a desperate hope that there is stability in the municipality, good governance and service delivery. The governing ANC has now conceded that the lack of service delivery has directly resulted in growing poverty and unemployment in the area.

"The issues of Maluti-a-Phofung are receiving our undivided attention," said the ANC Free State spokesperson Jabu Mbalula. I spoke to him after spending two weeks in the area, and he has confirmed what I have seen. "The main issue is clean, drinkable water. The second biggest issue is electricity," Mbalula summed up.

While he was unequivocal on the problems plaguing the area, Mbalula was hesitant to apportion blame to the ANC. He concedes that the ANC "made mistakes", but points to the 18-month tenure of MaP-16 as far worse for residents. He was also vague on the solutions to the persisting problems.

What will be done to solve these problems. I asked him. "There has been engagement with Eskom. There's been engagements with the national Department of Water Affairs to assist in that area, and projects are now underway to resolve those two critical issues," he committed.

Since 2020, then-deputy president David Mabuza has been trying to resolve Maluti-a-Phofung's stalemate with Eskom. He held several open and closed meetings in the area to come up with a plan for the municipality to begin a debt repayment plan with Eskom. There have also been several efforts to cut the municipality out as the middleman.

The Gauteng High Court ruled in 2021 that Eskom must directly supply and bill consumers in the area, but that court order was never adhered to. The provincial government still believes that this agreement would work towards resolving the energy crises in the area, but local

councillors reminded me that no plan has been tabled to the council. There are also concerns by the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) that if the municipality doesn't receive income from electricity, it will be completely financially unsustainable.

The unsustainability of the municipality is a theme that permeated most of my conversations with residents and politicians alike. Regardless of political interventions, Maluti-a-Phofung remains financially unsustainable. Many have proposed a rethink of the municipality as it stands.

I asked: Can a change in politics and improvement in governance change the situation for residents in the area? There were mixed responses.

The DA, in 2022, made submissions to the Municipal Demarcation Board (MDB) for Harrismith and Kestell to be separated into their own municipality. The DA said the decision to merge four Transitional Local Councils (TLCS) into one municipality was "irrational and extremely controversial".

"That decision had the effect of creating an ungovernable, non-viable, and financially unsustainable municipality. Over the past 22 years, that decision has been proven to be disastrous and has created one of the worst local governments in the country, in which residents receive no services, economic development is impossible, and the municipality owes R10 billion to its creditors." The DA's demand was clear: The MDB must remove Harrismith and Kestell from the current Maluti-a-Phofung municipality and create a sustainable and viable municipality.

For Ben Deysel, the chairperson of the Harrismith Business Council, splitting Maluti-a-Phofung into two separate municipalities and giving Harrismith and Kestell their own administrative head is the only solution. "I have had many debates with many ministers about this. I spoke to ministers Zweli Mkhize, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma and (deputy minister) Parks Tau. The current municipality is not financially viable," Ben said.

He added that he has made submissions to government on behalf of local businesses to make Harrismith self-sustaining. "A bad municipality means a total absence of municipal service for Harrismith," he said.

Ben said he had fought government on a local level for over a decade and a half, but sees no other solution besides a new demarcation of the municipality. “Harrismith contributes most of the tax revenue and gets little to no service,” he said.

By having the municipality seat in QwaQwa, the attention of councillors was not on his town, Ben said. Many residents I spoke to agreed. “Residents of Harrismith are funding the whole municipality, but we are not getting any services,” Nazeera Hansa explained why she submitted to the MDB.

While Mandlankosi of the ANC was the first to concede in an interview that the decision to merge the four TLCs had created a non-viable municipality, he cautioned at a reversal back to apartheid Bantustans. The ANC in the Free State was unconvinced. “The MDB must consult, but we can solve the issues at hand,” he explained. Efforts to speak to the MDB were unsuccessful.

To solve the problems facing the municipality, opposition parties suggested that the ANC reins in internal factionalism, which has led to the mayor not appointing an executive council for four months. During my time in Maluti-a-Phofung, I tried to speak to the mayor or members of her mayoral committee, but I later realised that Mayor Lekaje had yet to appoint councillors to have executive oversight of different portfolios in the municipality. She had agreed to be interviewed by me but cancelled several times.

Reflecting on the this, Mandlankosi said this meant that he was stretched thin as the Speaker to respond to the unending needs of the community as the speaker. When pressed why this was the case, he referred the matter to the provincial ANC.

Jabu Mbalula, speaking on behalf of the ANC in the province, said the mayor was filling the position on an interim basis, and that the ANC provincial and national leaders were applying their minds on who should be the mayor.

“The ANC is working on it as we speak,” he said without committing to when the party would enforce political stability in the Maluti-a-Phofung council.

At the same time, the concerns around a culture of impunity remain. I tried in earnest to track down the outcome of the SIU probe into the municipality, but could not find a report or an update.

Former Maluti-a-Phofung Municipality city manager Futhuli Patrick Mothamaha was arrested in 2022 for corruption. He was accused of awarding a R58-million contract to Kill Crime Security Company without following proper supply chain processes. Mothamaha's arrest was hailed as a victory against impunity. However, in August 2023, he was acquitted by the Commercial Crime Court, and he sought to be reinstated in his position.

I tried to follow up on other corruption cases in the municipality but did not get far. It appeared that the political uncertainty exacerbated an environment of chaos and uncertainty.

Two weeks after I visited the municipality, it emerged that a council sitting had resolved to suspend the Director of Corporate and Legal Affairs, Sam Makhubu, amid allegations of financial misconduct. Makhubu was allegedly involved in adjusting salaries and promoting employees unilaterally. This as the council had placed a moratorium on any recruitment and salary adjustments until the municipality could finalise a new organogram of employees.

At present, workers at the municipality do not have job titles and there is confusion about who is meant to fulfil which tasks. But while Makhubu was suspended, political parties in the council expressed concern that the municipality does not have a functional disciplinary committee to investigate cases of financial misconduct. A whistle-blower who did not want to be named insisted that dishing out jobs and promotions in the broke municipality had the buy-in of politicians who ran the council under the MaP-16 coalition.

The deterioration of the areas that fall under Maluti-a-Phofung is a "man-made political problem", according to the head of the business forum. Ben runs one of the biggest truck stops in South Africa and on the continent and can see a persistent economic downturn in the area.

"I don't see things getting better politically," he said. He has run various big businesses in the area since 1995 and said he can see his businesses performing badly in recent years. "There is just uncertainty. You don't know from day to day whether you have electricity or water," Ben explained. Despite the political developments with coalition governments, he has no faith in local politics. But, he admits, almost paradoxically, that he remains optimistic about his business prospects. "I am an entrepreneur and a businessman. I have to be positive. I believe in the future. Believe in the town. I am working hard. I am not going overseas," he said.

Ben spelt out to me his plans for building a retail centre in Harrismith on the intersection between the N3 and the N5 highways. “We will be investing about R220 to R240 million over the next two years,” he said.

I point out the paradox in business being completely disillusioned with local politics, yet he was still prepared to make a massive investment. “We are not going to rely on government at all,” he responded. As part of their plans, Ben said they have invested in solar plants, water storage capacity and boreholes so that the economic development is completely independent of the municipal services.

“We will be isolated from the community completely,” he confirmed. Ben says despite the economic stagnation, economic opportunity still exists in the area, “politics created the problem”. And as a result, 200 permanent jobs will be created in the area in the next year.

As a political reporter for 10 years, I often reported on Maluti-a-Phofung from afar. Year in and year out, the Office of the Auditor-General bemoaned how financials were simply not submitted even though the municipality spent R20 million on financials in one year.

I reported on the municipality’s staggering debt to Eskom and how the power utility sought a court order to distribute electricity directly to consumers without the ailing municipality as a middleman. I watched with keen interest how ANC factionalism took centre stage and how the party’s disregard towards allegations of corruption cost the party. I took a step closer in 2021 when the ANC’s support plummeted, and Maluti-a-Phofung became one of many municipalities governed by a coalition government.

Dozens of parliamentary reports over the last decade track the persistent decline in services and increase in corruption and malfeasance. This was confirmed when witnessing the lived reality of residents in the area. I heard firsthand accounts of what life is like when corruption and ill-governance cost basic services. I heard how an economic turnaround in the struggling towns of QwaQwa, Kestell and Harrismith is held ransom by bad politics. On my return from Maluti-a-Phofung I realised that the problems are too glaring for anyone to deny. The solutions to the problems, however, remain few and far between.

When spending time with Nomaswazi and Theresia in and around QwaQwa, the legacy of apartheid loomed large. 30 years after QwaQwa was made part of South Africa from a former

Bantustan homeland, there are indisputable developments. QwaQwa has tarred roads, there are government-built houses and many no-fee schools. The ANC government has, over the last three decades, worked to improve the lives of residents of this area. But, in the last decade, has faltered and reversed its own gains as a result of bad governance. As a result, poverty remains largely along racial lines. This is why, when government faulters, the poor pay the highest price.

For Nazeera and Jan who live in the built up Harrismith, their privilege compared to Nomaswazi and Theresia is evident. They can pay for private services to form a barrier between them and the failures of the municipality. However, this is not a luxury enjoyed by all. It is for this reason people like Wilhelm and Ben persisting in their community activism. While many people remain disillusioned in the local government, their sense of resilience is apparent.

Eskom remains committed to enforcing the court order that allows them to deliver electricity straight to consumers without the municipality being a conduit. The department of water is determined that the water woes in the area would be resolved soon. The National Treasurer increased the R350 grant by R20 to deal with staggering food prices. And the ANC-led coalition government said that it was working hard to turn things around.

But as I conclude this report, the ANC was yet to overcome internal squabbles to appoint a permanent mayor. This meant that there were no permanent political heads in the council. The trickledown effect is that there remained no accountability as staff of the municipality do not have job descriptions. The budget for 2024 remained unfunded. Corruption probes are still incomplete.

There is no quick fix solution to the woes persisting in Maluti-a-Phofung, all residents agree. The impact of a decade of bad politics and impunity will last for years to come. But, the will of the residents to live and thrive in spite of government failures remain inspiring.

The municipality website lists teamwork, integrity, professionalism and accountability as its values. But for Nomaswazi, Nazeera or Jan, those ideals don’t exist in the dirty streets of Maluti-a-Phofung. While they hope for a better government, they will work to make things better themselves.

Annexure

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND JOHANNESBURG | FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

Student: Ms Qaanitah Hunter
CC. Supervisor: Prof Anton Harber

Student Number: 1520590

08 February 2024

Dear Ms Qaanitah Hunter

DECISION ON RESEARCH PROPOSAL SUBMITTED FOR THE MASTER OF MUSIC

I am pleased to advise you of the decision reached by the reader/readers of the Graduate Studies Committee on your proposal entitled: "***Maluti-a-Phofung: Maluti-a-Phofung: A study of municipal powers, state intervention, and meeting service delivery needs.***"

Reader's decision on proposal:

Accepted, but candidate should take note of warnings/recommendations.

I confirm that Prof Anton Harber has been appointed as your supervisor.

Please take note of the information on the Criteria for submitting research for examination which is attached and ensure that the Faculty is informed of any changes of address during the year.

Kindly note that all MA and PhD candidates who would like to graduate as soon as possible must ensure that they meet the ETD requirements within six (6) weeks of receipt of the examiners' reports by the supervisor. **A student is required to remain registered in the Faculty until his/her graduation.**

Yours Sincerely

M Ntseare

Mpho Ntseare (Ms)
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