

DISASTER IN SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL MUNICIPALITIES: CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF CORRUPTION ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROWTH

DESASTRE NOS MUNICÍPIOS LOCAIS DA ÁFRICA DO SUL: CAUSAS E EFEITOS DA CORRUPÇÃO NO CRESCIMENTO SOCIOECONÔMICO

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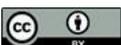
Abstract

This study investigates the causes and effects of corruption on socio-economic growth by critically reviewing the current literature on corruption within South African local municipalities, with a particular focus on the Mahikeng local municipality as a key example. Through a qualitative method of research, forty-five research articles were conveniently selected and analyzed. The findings reveal that corruption occurs at both the micro and macro levels of organizational management. At the micro level, municipal corruption stems from poor management, leadership, and inadequate implementation of organizational strategies. At the macro level, political interference plays a central role in causing and perpetuating corruption. The study suggests a strong positive correlation between political interference and corruption. Regarding the effects of corruption on socio-economic growth, this study found that corruption leads to the neglect of organizational capacity development and essential services, which in turn weakens organizational performance and, ultimately, economic performance. Weak economic performance slows job creation and exacerbates inequality. These outcomes hinder sustainable development and underscore the urgent need for stronger accountability and governance reforms.

Keywords: Corruption. Economic Growth. Local Government. South African

Resumo

Este estudo investiga as causas e os efeitos da corrupção no crescimento socioeconômico, revisando criticamente a literatura atual sobre corrupção em municípios locais da África do Sul, com foco particular no município de Mahikeng como exemplo-chave. Por meio de um método qualitativo de pesquisa, quarenta e cinco artigos foram convenientemente selecionados e analisados. Os resultados revelam que a corrupção ocorre tanto no nível micro quanto no macro da gestão organizacional. No nível micro, a corrupção municipal decorre de má gestão, liderança e implementação inadequada de estratégias organizacionais. No nível macro, a interferência política desempenha um papel central na causa e perpetuação da corrupção. O estudo sugere uma forte correlação positiva entre interferência política e corrupção. Em relação aos efeitos da corrupção no crescimento socioeconômico, este estudo constatou que a corrupção leva à negligência do desenvolvimento da capacidade organizacional e de serviços essenciais, o que, por sua vez, enfraquece o desempenho organizacional e, em última análise, o desempenho econômico. O fraco desempenho econômico retarda a criação de empregos e agrava a desigualdade. Esses resultados prejudicam o desenvolvimento sustentável e ressaltam a necessidade urgente de reformas mais rigorosas de responsabilização e governança.



Municipalities. Organisational Performance.
Socio-economy.

Palavras-chave: *Corrupção. Crescimento Econômico. Governo Local. Municípios Sul-Africanos. Desempenho Organizacional. Socioeconomia.*

1 INTRODUCTION

Corruption is a pervasive phenomenon that affects nations across the globe to varying degrees, manifesting at both micro and macro levels (Agubu, 2001). It is present in democratic and autocratic regimes, as well as in feudal, capitalist, and communist economies. Corrupt practices are not a contemporary issue; they have persisted throughout recorded history (Lipset and Lenz, 2000). In recent years, particularly during the 1990s, corruption has received significant attention.

The prominence of corruption-related concerns in public discourse has been a defining aspect of South Africa's political landscape since the country's transition to democracy in 1994. Allegations of dishonesty within public administration have been widespread, encompassing issues such as the embezzlement of pension funds by civil service clerks and claims of cabinet members' involvement in unethical practices related to the procurement of multimillion-dollar weapons systems (Hyslop, 2005). Between 1996 and 2016, South Africa scored 45 out of 100 on the Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International, 2016). Additionally, South Africa's Corruption Index averaged 46.97 points, peaking at 56.80 points in 1996 and dipping to 41 points in 2011 (Krsteski, 2017).

Local municipalities in South Africa continue to grapple with the challenge of delivering accountable and transparent governance more than two decades after the establishment of a democratic system. The Auditor-General (2015) emphasizes that the Republic of South Africa's constitution mandates local governments to fulfill their institutional responsibilities in an economical, effective, and efficient manner. Corruption often cascades downward from the national to the local level.

Municipalities represent the tier of government closest to the populace in South Africa. These legally established, community-based institutions are guided by the aspirational ideals embodied in the nation's constitution, laws, and regulations, all aimed at safeguarding citizens' fundamental human rights and enhancing social welfare. According to Dube (1984), municipalities have a moral and legal obligation to adhere to the Batho Pele (People First) principles to address basic human needs. Leaders who are

either unable or unwilling to act with integrity or who lack the capability to implement approved decisions are deemed corrupt. A municipality experiencing failure may be deteriorating due to individual deficiencies, systemic degradation, or a breakdown of governance structures (Bracking, 2007).

Recent evaluations indicate that the polarization of interests and political factionalism, along with the emergence of new political alliances and elites, have contributed to the ongoing decline in municipal functionality (CoGTA, 2016). It is imperative that the turnaround strategy intensively address these issues, as the capacity of national and provincial governments to effectively resolve these challenges is limited.

According to Obayelu (2007), corruption entails the use of illicit methods to acquire wealth or power at the expense of the public or the misappropriation of public resources for personal gain. Corruption has precipitated the downfall of governments, the loss of significant political offices, and, in extreme cases, the complete replacement of political classes in both developed and developing nations. By impacting various factors that drive economic growth—such as investment, taxation, and the efficacy of government expenditure—corruption can indirectly undermine a country's economic performance.

According to Roser (2013), economic growth is the increase in the quantity and quality of goods and services produced and consumed within a society. It is regarded as an effective method for alleviating poverty and enhancing living standards. In South Africa, particularly the Mahikeng Local Municipality, inadequate corporate governance practices have led to issues such as corruption, misappropriation of public funds, and poor administration (Sethunyane, 2020). Recently, Mahikeng has gained a negative reputation due to these problems. This study aims to assess the impact of corruption on economic growth within the Mahikeng Local Municipality.

2 METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Research methodology outlines how a researcher intends to conduct an investigation. It is a systematic approach to addressing a research question. A well-defined methodology details the steps a researcher will undertake to ensure reliable and accurate data that meet specific goals and objectives. It encompasses the types of

information to be gathered, the sources from which it will be obtained, and methods of analysis (Indeed Editorial Team, 2021).

The research design provides the framework for the study, articulated through clearly defined parameters (Burns & Grove, 2001:223). The design specifies the procedures to be followed, the methods to be employed, and how these elements will collectively contribute to answering the research question (Grey, 2014).

This paper will employ a descriptive research design. A descriptive study emphasizes clear presentation while conducting direct inquiry, analysis, and description of specific phenomena (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999:49). The research topic, which evaluates the impact of corruption on economic growth in the Mahikeng Local Municipality, serves as the foundation for selecting this research design. Descriptive research allows for a thorough exploration of the historical context of the problem before further investigation (VOXCO, 2021) and facilitates tracking changes in variables over time to identify and analyze patterns.

3 DATA COLLECTION

Data comprises various types of information organized systematically. Data collection involves gathering, measuring, and analyzing information from multiple sources to derive precise answers to the research questions (Lowe, 2001). The significance of data collection lies in supporting quality control, research integrity, and informed decision-making. Researchers should outline the categories of data collected, the sources of this data, and the methodologies employed.

For this study, data will be collected using secondary data approaches. Secondary data refers to information that has already been gathered and statistically analyzed by others, including published literature, textbooks, journals, articles, and other relevant sources (Lowe, 2001). To ensure a comprehensive investigation, this study will utilize journal articles, published data, and academic papers as sources of secondary data.

3.1 Data analysis

Data analysis, as defined by Marshall & Rossman (1999), is the process of organizing, ordering, and assigning significance to collected data. It is often messy, hazy,

time-consuming, yet also creative and exciting. Although the process does not follow a linear path, it generally involves interpreting and conceptualizing data to seek broad generalizations across various categories (Schwandt, 2007). The primary aim of data analysis is to extract relevant information and base judgments on that analysis (Johnson, 2022). Whiting (2021) describes data analysis as the process of drawing statistically based conclusions through research.

This investigation will utilize qualitative data analysis. According to Henderson (2016), qualitative data analysis involves describing, categorizing, and connecting phenomena with the researcher's conceptual framework. The objectives of qualitative data analysis include describing a phenomenon in depth, comparing situations to identify commonalities or differences, and constructing a hypothesis about the phenomenon based on empirical data analysis (Flick, 2013).

3.2 Literature review on the interconnectedness of corruption and economic growth

Corruption has many definitions, each somewhat incomplete. While it may be difficult to describe, it is typically easy to recognize. Most observers would likely agree on whether a specific behavior indicates corruption, although such behavior is often difficult to witness directly, as corrupt acts usually do not occur in broad daylight (Tanzi, 1998).

The World Bank defines corruption as “the abuse of public power for private gain.” This definition does not imply that corruption is exclusive to public sector operations; it also exists in private activities subject to government regulation. Tanzi (1998) posits that in many cases, the misuse of public authority may serve the interests of an individual's party, class, tribe, friends, family, or other groups.

Corruption is generally linked to government operations, especially where the government holds monopolistic or discretionary power. In a *Business Week* column, Nobel laureate Gary Becker commented, “if we abolish the state, we abolish corruption.” However, a state is essential for the functioning of a civilized society, and in modern countries, it must fulfill various roles. Numerous factors contribute to corruption, and it could potentially be eradicated if measurable. Conceptually, it is unclear what one would wish to measure; focusing solely on bribes would exclude many corrupt behaviors that do not involve bribery (Tanzi, 1998).

4 ECONOMIC GROWTH

According to Haller (2012), economic growth refers to an increase in national income per capita. It involves analyzing this process, particularly in quantitative terms, focusing on the functional relationships among endogenous variables. In a broader sense, economic growth encompasses increases in GDP, GNP, and national income, leading to an overall enhancement of national wealth, including production capacity, expressed in both absolute and relative terms per capita.

Economic growth is a complex, long-term process that encounters several obstacles, including excessive population growth, resource scarcity, inadequate infrastructure, inefficient resource utilization, excessive government intervention, and institutional and cultural paradigms that impede progress. It is achieved by enhancing a nation's production capacity and efficiently utilizing existing resources, facilitating the transfer of revenue between individuals and society. Over periods of a decade or more, cumulative impacts or even modest variations in growth rates can become significant. In a dynamic, expanding society, income redistribution is more feasible compared to a static one (Haller, 2012).

Economic growth can coexist with economic fluctuations. By implementing expansionary monetary and fiscal measures, recessionary gaps can be closed, allowing GDP to rise above its potential. Economic growth involves a change in potential output due to variations in the supply of factors (labor and capital) or an increase in the productivity of these factors (output per unit of input). When the rate of economic growth is high, an increase in the production of goods and services can lead to a reduction in the unemployment rate, an increase in job opportunities, and an overall improvement in the standard of living for the population (Haller, 2012).

5 CORRUPTION AND ECONOMIC GROWTH IN SOUTH AFRICAN MUNICIPALITIES

Ofusori (2020) identifies various factors contributing to South Africa's slowing economic growth, with corruption being a primary concern. For many African nations,

particularly South Africa, corruption has been a significant economic setback, often described as "the evil" as it undermines the development of political systems and public administration.

In recent years, there has been a gradual yet steady increase in the perception of corruption in South Africa. The ongoing rise in corruption and inefficiency in the public sector has contributed to South Africans being among the least satisfied populations. This discontent has occasionally sparked protests across the country due to the adverse economic effects on citizens. Consequently, this may lead to increased unemployment, declining tax revenues, reduced business activity, and ultimately, economic collapse (Ofusori, 2020).

South African municipalities are experiencing a significant increase in corruption, as evidenced by reports from various parliamentary committees and the media. In many municipalities, corruption disproportionately affects the underprivileged and hinders effective governance. The escalation of municipal corruption in South Africa has severely impacted stability and public trust, eroding democratic values and principles, which may adversely affect the viability of local government. If corruption within municipalities is not addressed, it could result in poor governance (Theletsane, 2013).

According to media reports and findings from the Auditor General, municipalities are facing a debilitating leadership crisis that exacerbates issues of corruption, structural poverty, and underdevelopment. Many South Africans believed that the leaders succeeding colonial rulers would effectively and innovatively utilize resources to implement significant reform and transformation following the country's liberation. Ironically, municipalities are now viewed as the most corrupt branch of government. Numerous challenges associated with the leadership crisis in local government play a critical role in fostering a corrupt environment (Theletsane, 2013).

6 CORRUPTION AND ECONOMIC GROWTH IN THE MAHIKENG LOCAL MUNICIPALITY

A municipality's municipal manager is responsible for all decisions made or not made regarding that municipality (Mathiba, 2019). The municipal manager serves as the chief administrative and financial officer of the municipality, meaning that all actions taken by the Mahikeng Local Municipality (MLM) require the municipal manager's

approval, as outlined in sections 6 through 70 of the Municipal Finance Management Act 56 of 2003 (commonly referred to as the “Finance Management Act”) and section 54A(1)(a) of the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 (known as the “Systems Act”; Joubert & Faris, 2008, p. 149). Additionally, according to Section 55(1)(a) of the Systems Act, the municipal manager is tasked with establishing and maintaining an MLM administration that is responsive, accountable, and socioeconomically successful. However, the MLM continues to face challenges related to poor financial management and service delivery (Mathiba, 2019), including significant issues with fraud, mismanagement, and the theft of public funds.

Due to its financial difficulties, the MLM has received disclaimers of opinion from the Auditor-General from 2015 to 2019. Since 2015, the municipal manager and council have been spending money in an unlawful, irregular, wasteful, and inefficient manner (Mahikeng Local Municipality Annual Report, 2019).

The four main drivers of economic growth are land, labor, capital, and entrepreneurship. Despite being located in the main city of the North West Province, the MLM's economic growth rate is not as high as it should be. Residents continue to experience elevated levels of poverty and unemployment (Maseng, 2015). The MLM developed its Integrated Development Plan (IDP) in 2004 and formally implemented it in 2005, yet the municipality still struggles with inadequate service delivery and aging infrastructure. This has led to significant community protests regarding the poor services provided under their governance. Meeting basic necessities is essential for economic development and improving the standard of living (Maseng, 2015).

7 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There is a strong correlation between various macroeconomic metrics and corruption. According to Nwabuzor (2005), corruption hinders the emergence of new workplaces, deters foreign direct investment, stifles innovative strategies, and increases the costs of goods and services. Furthermore, corruption has a significant negative impact on wealth distribution within the economy.

Numerous studies have shown that corruption diminishes government revenue and expenditures while also degrading the quality of services provided (Spyromitros & Panagiotidis, 2022). The “sand the wheels” and “grease the wheels” hypotheses explain

the relationship between corruption and economic progress. The first theory suggests that corruption has a detrimental effect on economic growth, while the “grease the wheels” theory argues that corruption can actually facilitate economic growth (Spyromitros & Panagiotidis, 2022).

The first “sand the wheels” notion is particularly relevant to the Mahikeng Local Municipality. Corruption has hindered the municipality's economic development. From the 2015 financial year to 2019, the municipality received a disclaimer of opinion, a qualified audit opinion, and a disclaimer audit opinion from the Auditor-General (Chitimira, Sethunyane & Magau, 2022). These opinions indicated that the municipality failed to account for its finances or provide the necessary audit evidence to the Auditor-General. Additionally, the municipality's financial statements contained material misstatements, and the municipal manager neglected to provide the required financial accountability and audit evidence (Chitimira et al., 2022).

Between 2016 and 2019, the Mahikeng Local Municipality faced persistent service delivery deficiencies, leading to numerous public protests (Mathiba, 2019). Significant administrative and political challenges resulted in the appointment of a provincial financial administrator in October 2018 (Mathiba, 2019). Since 2015, the municipal manager and council have engaged in unapproved and wasteful expenditures (Mahikeng Local Municipality, 2019), negatively impacting the local community and basic service delivery.

Thato Molosankwe, a social activist, stated that corruption has undermined the dignity of what was once a vibrant capital of the Northwest. He attributes the region's decline to nepotism, greed, and the destruction of historical structures aimed at erasing Bophuthatswana's heritage (Sefularo and Javier, 2021). Mahikeng once had a thriving economy supported by world-class infrastructure, tourism, and education. Molosankwe remarked, “When you enter Mahikeng, you don't see the capital city; you just see a poor town... a miserable town.”

Thabo Mokoena, the former municipal manager, faced court proceedings in 2017 for an unauthorized investment of R92 million in VBS Mutual Bank. The National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) indicated that the transaction violated the Municipal Finance Management Act. Mokoena is also alleged to have received benefits in the form of credit facilities for purchasing a house in Klerksdorp and two luxury vehicles totaling R1,275,318.96. Preliminary investigations revealed that only R7 million of the

improperly invested R92 million was returned to the Mahikeng Local Council (Khumalo, 2022).

These issues disadvantage the municipality, resulting in diminished service delivery. Economic growth is set to decline sharply without prioritizing job creation and infrastructure improvements. The once-stately infrastructure is now in disrepair, and the economy is faltering due to dishonest authorities.

8 CAUSES OF CORRUPTION IN THE MAHIKENG LOCAL MUNICIPALITY

The Auditor-General's disclaimer regarding the financial accounts of the Mahikeng Local Municipality for 2011-2015 indicates a lack of sufficient audit evidence to support the disclosures in the financial statements (AGSA, 2014).

Section 125(2)(d)(1) of the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA) requires municipalities to disclose specific details on irregular expenditures. Due to statements made in violation of supply chain management regulations, irregular items were understated by R2,782,173 and omitted from the reported irregular expenditure (Mbuu, 2016). Additionally, the Auditor-General was unable to gather adequate audit data to substantiate the improper expenditures disclosed the previous year, preventing a determination on whether the irregular expenditure of R39,587,650 referenced required further adjustments. Irregular expenditures are those incurred in violation of applicable laws and regulations (MFMA supply chain management policy), suggesting that management is bypassing established protocols.

The Auditor-General's report for the Mahikeng Local Municipality (2014) identified several issues, highlighting inefficient disclosures in the financial years 2013 and 2012.

- **Unauthorized, Ineffective, and Wasteful Spending:** Unapproved expenditures totaling R111,809,414 from prior years have not been addressed per Section 32 of the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA). In the current year, fruitless and wasteful expenditures of R97,087 were incurred, and R5,270,237 from previous years remains unresolved in compliance with Section 32 of the MFMA.
- **Material Underspending of Council Grants:** The municipality underspent its conditional grants by R42,003,921, raising concerns about its ability to achieve established goals.

The financial results of the MLM for 2018–2022 are discouraging. Since 2015, the city manager and municipal council have engaged in unlawful, irregular, and wasteful financial practices, highlighting accountability for corruption lies with these officials. Despite budget allocations, their actions often result in minimal effective fund utilization for public benefit.

8.1 Unauthorized expenditure

Unauthorized expenditure occurs when the municipality incurs expenses without an approved budget. This practice contravenes the Finance Management Act, which requires the municipal manager to report unauthorized spending in the municipality's annual financial statements. Since 2013, the Auditor-General has faced challenges in obtaining sufficient evidence to substantiate unlawful expenditures within MLM. The lack of robust governance frameworks to identify and mitigate unapproved spending exacerbates these challenges. Additionally, the municipal manager and council have neglected Section 62(1)(d) of the Finance Management Act by failing to implement measures to prevent unlawful expenditures.

8.2 Irregular expenditure

Over the past five years, the South African public sector has incurred R22 billion (\$1.3 billion) in fruitless and wasteful expenditure (Madingwaneng, 2024). Irregular expenditure occurs when municipal funds are used in contravention of applicable laws, including the Finance Management Act and the Systems Act. Since 2013, MLM has engaged in irregular spending that violates supply chain management regulations. The MLM failed to account for approximately R970,094,162 associated with irregular expenditures and did not quantify these in its annual financial statements.

The majority of the irregular expenditures by MLM stemmed from corrupt practices, an unlawful and uncompetitive bidding process, and inadequate corporate governance procedures (MLM Annual Report, 2019:347).

8.3 Lack of consequence management

To maintain or restore essential services to the affected community and address challenges such as natural disasters, maladministration, and corruption, relevant authorities implement effective measures known as “consequence management” (Chitimira et al., 2022). To date, the MLM has not investigated or taken action against unauthorized, irregular, unnecessary, or wasteful spending within the municipality.

8.4 Employment of individuals without relevant expertise

Hiring qualified personnel or appointing individuals with the requisite experience is essential for the effective management of a municipality (Bogopa, 2021:112-120). However, municipalities such as the MLM have established a pattern of appointing individuals with only a high school diploma to critical positions, including supply chain managers and chief financial officers (Manyaka & Madzivhandila, 2013:174-185). Consequently, the municipality is experiencing a shortage of qualified individuals with the expertise necessary for effective service delivery and associated responsibilities (Theletsane, 2013:134-142). It appears that the MLM does not adhere to appropriate hiring procedures, which necessitate consideration of candidates’ experience, competencies, and qualifications.

8.5 Inadequate investigation of unlawful conduct

In 2019, the MLM municipal council initiated an inquiry into the municipal manager’s alleged financial misconduct, maladministration, fraud, and corruption; however, the investigation has not yet been adequately concluded. This suggests that inquiries into financial misconduct and related irregularities within multilevel marketing are either ongoing or remain unresolved (Chitimira et al., 2022).

8.6 Lack of accountability

Accountability is established when individuals or departments are held responsible for their actions and activities. In the absence of accountability, those engaged

in unlawful behavior often fail to accept full responsibility for their actions or to address the consequences (Chitimira et al., 2022). Thus far, the MLM municipal council has not held dishonest personnel, including the municipal manager, accountable for their unlawful actions.

8.7 Political interference

According to the Auditor-General's Consolidated Report from 2019, the MLM has not yet established a transparent, impartial, and accountable administration free from political influence. Political infighting within the MLM has hindered service delivery to the community (Horn & Raga, 2012:71–88). Political interests are prioritized over the needs of the MLM community, adversely affecting managerial effectiveness, good governance, and service delivery (Chitimira et al., 2022).

9 CONCLUSION

Corruption has a detrimental impact on society, both directly and indirectly. African nations are estimated to lose 25% of their annual GDP due to corruption. The prevalence of corruption in South Africa is alarming, given the numerous scandals and incidents (Pillay, 2022). At the Financial Times Africa Summit in London in 2019, President Cyril Ramaphosa stated that corruption had cost South Africa as much as R1 trillion, a significant amount that could have transformed the lives of millions of young people across the country (Ngqambela, 2020). Municipalities are often regarded as hotspots for corruption, and the MLM has earned a negative reputation for corruption, misappropriation of public funds, and mismanagement.

People in the municipality are still struggling with unemployment and poverty, so the municipality's very low rate of economic growth is a cause for concern. The Mahikeng Local Municipality should put in place efficient systems to spot and deal with corruption in order to prevent delays in investigations into instances of poor municipal administration and corruption. To ensure sufficient transparency and accountability, it should also recruit people with the required experience to key strategic roles.

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