

Chapter 9

Redirecting the Functioning of Local Government through Digital Governance in South Africa

Elvin Shava

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Abstract

Calls are getting louder regarding using the proverbial carrot-and-stick approach in local government in South Africa. This is because previous interventions to enhance the functioning of local government have not been working, resulting in poor service delivery in communities, as indicated in the recent Auditor General Report 2021/22 in South Africa. Redirecting the functioning of local government in the digital age can be achieved by harnessing various institutional competencies to enable digital governance to flourish in public service delivery. A qualitative approach was adopted for this chapter, using a literature review analysis to uncover the various challenges and opportunities that may be triggered by digital governance in local government in South Africa. The critical analysis of the documents has indicated the need to reinforce the core competencies of municipal leaders, which are critical in redirecting local governments using modern digital technologies that may enhance decision-making, communication and general information dissemination to stakeholders in the local sphere. Managing institutional readiness has become imperative for local government to ensure that municipal structures and systems are transparent, responsive, accountable, and ready to embrace change that may be triggered by digital governance processes towards improving public service delivery. The chapter advances knowledge on municipal governance through digital governance as a contemporary paradigm that can transform local government into an efficient and accountable service provider in South Africa.

Keywords: Local government, Digital governance, Smart public service delivery, South Africa

Introduction

Various bureaucratic deficiencies experienced in sub-national and local governments in most developing countries require a paradigm shift and the adoption of alternative service delivery techniques to effectively respond to citizens' delivery demands. A somehow thriving and yet contested democracy, South Africa is not spared from the administrative and political ills that are bedevilling local government from fully implementing service delivery reforms that may allow quality service delivery to the citizens. The popularity of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) discourse in the past few years could have triggered the spirit of change in South Africa's public administration, of which local government is the most strategic arm and the focal point where communities interface with service providers in terms of service delivery (Van der Waldt, 2023). The implementation of digital governance has become a possibility in redirecting the functionality of local government, as witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic when many local governments switched to the use of online and digital tools to communicate with citizens regarding service delivery matters. The passing of the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector in October 2022 set the tone for professionalising the public service and calls for various human resource departments to reform and promote digital governance in hiring and selection, as well as retaining skilled talent (Republic of South Africa, 2022). Redirecting local government in South Africa requires collaborative effort by local government and stakeholders

to ensure that digital governance is embraced, while the challenges triggered by its complexity are managed harmoniously and smartly.

Digital governance is a multi-faceted concept that has not found an adequate meaning in literature. In simple terms, it refers to the widescale use of modern digital technologies and information communication technologies (ICTs) to improve decision-making and effectively uphold accountability to the public. Van der Waldt (2023) views digital governance as a critical element for attaining global competitiveness by leveraging digital technologies to advance economic competitiveness and productivity. Milakovich (2021) affirms that digital governance allows public officials to implement advanced technologies, manage remote workforces, measure performance and improve service delivery in contested administrative and political environments. The scholar argues that applying advanced digital governance in local government demands critical changes in the relationships between citizens and their governments while ICTs will be utilised as catalysts to accelerate both administrative and political communication (Milakovich, 2021).

This study embraces the implementation of this concept that is deriving from the competing definitions of digital governance, to enhance accountability and citizen participation, including efficiency in redirecting South African local government. Calls are getting louder regarding using the proverbial carrot-and-stick approach in local government in South Africa. This is because previous interventions to enhance the functioning of local government have not worked, resulting in poor service delivery in communities (Auditor General South Africa, 2022). Many institutional impediments were revealed in the form of poor compliance with legislation, poor mismanagement, political interest in hiring processes, and the recurrent scourge of corruption. Hofisi and Chigova (2023) argue that redirecting the functioning of local government in the digital age can be achieved by harnessing the various institutional competencies to enable digital governance to flourish in public service delivery. This chapter interrogates the availability and viability of institutional systems and processes in embracing digital governance, which I argue is the alternative mechanism for redirecting the operations of local government in the digital age.

The chapter used a critical literature review analysis to uncover the various pitfalls and promises that may be triggered by digital governance in local government in South Africa. Expansive literature and eclectic sources that inform e-governance, digital governance and smart public service delivery were examined, as they contained relevant data on the chapter topic. Peer-reviewed literature on digital governance was further consulted to validate and enrich the arguments emanating from the aforementioned sources. The chapter answers the following questions: What core competencies are required by municipal leaders in redirecting local government through digital governance in the digital age? What are the shortfalls and promises of digital governance in redirecting local government in the digital age?

After the introduction, the chapter contextualises digital governance and discusses the determinants of digital governance in local government in South Africa. The following section discusses the core competencies that are critical for municipal leaders to ensure smart digital governance, including the promises and pitfalls of digital governance in local government. The last section concludes, recommends and provides direction for further research.

Contextualising digital governance in South African local government in South Africa

In South Africa, local government is regarded as the closest sphere to the people, and its proximity makes it a central force in rendering public goods and services. The White Paper on Local Government 1998 gives leeway to local government to ensure that services are rendered in its area of jurisdiction for the benefit of communities. Given the recurrent problems of maladministration, corruption and financial embezzlement (among other local government woes), the need to improve service delivery and accountability has become a necessity. Digital governance can direct local government by em-

playing remote working conditions and improving accountability online, including reporting to citizens on how their money has been used to render services. As stated by Hofisi and Chigova (2023), using digital technologies can help leverage information dissemination, including upholding accountability and transparency.

The use of Facebook, e-portals, X, and WhatsApp messages in some local municipalities in South Africa is seen as a step towards embracing digital governance. Some municipalities utilise Zoom and Teams to conduct remote meetings, which is evidence that local governance in South Africa is embracing digital governance, in a challenge to the existing bureaucratic status quo of doing things by the book, which often derails decision-making and development. Although municipalities are embarking on *digi-imbizos*, where citizen reporting is done, as observed by Shava and Ndebele (2023) data marginalisation is a setback for local government in its attempt to fully embrace digital governance, as the growing digital divide can ruin local government initiatives in the field of digital governance. Other existing societal ills, including poverty, inequalities, historical injustices, spatial economic development, and a rise in youth unemployment, may act as obstacles for local governments to integrate digital technologies and ICTs across the various municipal departments. Further, the role of intergovernmental relations (IGR) needs to be strengthened to allow local government to harness various skills and resources to ensure that digital governance is inclusive and responsive to the needs of municipalities and the citizens at large. Redirecting local government in this digital era has its own merits in improving local government accountability mechanisms and oversight, which is key in mitigating financial leaks and preventing corruption, among other institutional problems within local government. Therefore, digital governance can go a long way in ensuring that local government officials are aware of digital whistleblowing mechanisms and the need for consequent management in the event of corruption and maladministration.

Determinants of digital governance in local government

In order for digital governance to flourish and redirect local government in South Africa, various determinants should be considered, as discussed below.

Technological environment

The inevitable 4IR revolution in which local governments operate globally requires the adoption of some of the modern digital technologies and ICTs that can help enhance service delivery. Having a robust risk adoption attitude that enables public officials to experiment and adopt technologies is the way forward to ensure that services can be delivered in a diversified but improved manner. Research conducted by De Reuver et al. (2017) revealed that the use of digital technologies in local government is increasing due to widespread connectivity, chances are high that this can promote operational efficiency and cost reduction. Since the local government in South Africa is struggling with financial constraints to support service delivery programmes, implementing modern digital technologies such as blockchain can help curb leakages in finances and enhance public sector taxation. These observations resonate with Shava and Mhlanga's (2023) study, where the authors indicated the various benefits of blockchain in improving accounting and taxation in African bureaucracies. In a similar vein, redirecting South African local government can be done by preparing local government systems and structures to become responsive to trends in the technological environment, and hence become prepared to utilise modern technologies that help reconfigure and complement existing service delivery mechanisms.

Nonetheless, research has shown the growth in the scale and complexity of threats posed by cyberattacks on local government (Dlamini, Mbambo & Ma, 2019; Pieterse, 2021). Cybercrime is another nightmare that local government should be prepared to face when redirecting its service delivery efforts in the digital age, as cybercriminals are increasingly becoming innovative and are operating at a bigger and faster scale to upset bureaucratic efforts to render public goods and services. Although the