A Critical Analysis of Factors Underlying Service Delivery Protests in South Africa

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Abstract

Service delivery has become a political hot potato for the African National Congress (ANC)-led government. The ANC came to power on the wave of popular support for its determination to improve the lives of ordinary South Africans. Although significant achievements have been made in the provision of services such as water, electricity, and sanitation, there is still simmering dissatisfaction. The first signs of disgruntlement surfaced in 2004 when a wave of protests gripped urban and metropolitan areas of all nine provinces. At its zenith, in May 2008, frustration with service delivery issues led to the death of 61 people. The protest phenomenon, commonly dubbed ‘service delivery protests’, is topical, of immense public interest and requires serious study and understanding. Although the media often reports on communities embarking on protests citing lack of, poor, or slow service delivery, seldom does it probe deeply into the actual reasons behind the protests. Service delivery protests have become a weapon of choice for rural communities and marginalized urban communities hoping to be heard in order to have their needs met. Proper understanding of factors underlying the protest phenomenon should focus the attention of local, provincial and national authorities on developing strategies to address key issues. Based on a critical analysis of four documented case studies and relevant literature on social protests, this paper uncovers not only service delivery issues, but also a number of extraneous factors implicated in the ubiquitous protest phenomenon. Structurally, the article is divided into three sections. Section one, the introduction, highlights the pervasiveness of protests in South Africa, points out controversy surrounding the phrase ‘service delivery protests’, indicates analysis of four documented case studies and the literature as the method of study, provides motivation for the investigation, briefly outlines history of the protest phenomenon in South Africa, and gives a theoretical framework. Section two, the core of the article, analyses the cases and literature, bringing out key factors. The concluding section suggests that vicious structural factors, including poverty, inequality, and unemployment, and the dual economies phenomenon, need to be comprehensively
addressed. This will give meaningful and dignifying lives to citizens, while concerted and relentless efforts are targeted addressing systemic/institutional challenges such as corruption, nepotism, and self-enrichment and lack of administrative, technical, and financial skills.

Key words: Service Delivery, Community Protest, Parliament, Urban Predominance

Introduction

Since 2004, community protests, or what are popularly called ‘service delivery protests’, have become a fairly established phenomenon. In fact it is claimed South Africa could be the protest capital of the world (Tong & Lei, 2010; Soong, 2006). Part of the problem in studying the protest phenomenon is lack of a common definition for ‘community protest’. According to Karamoko and Jain (2011:3), Municipal IQ identifies ‘major’ municipal service delivery protests as “those where communities oppose the pace and quality of service delivery by their municipalities”. Karamoko and Jain (2011:3) broaden the definition to include protests where complaints such as corruption or housing are raised by protesters without explicitly referring to inadequate service delivery. The justification for a broader definition is two-fold. First, difficulty in establishing concerns of protesters makes it necessary not to exclude any protest on the basis of it not being of a ‘service delivery’ nature. Secondly, a broader definition facilitates distinction between protests in which protesters’ complaints fall within the domain of local government and those where complaints go beyond local government mandate.

The reasons behind the boiling cauldron of ‘service delivery protests’ in South Africa are multifaceted. Often originating from the media, which has been accused of wanton sensationalism and labeling all community protests as having service-delivery related content without any critical analysis, the phrase ‘service delivery protest’ is controversial. Underpinning protests often lay deep and complex factors which can be uncovered only through careful analysis. Without taking an initial position on appropriateness of the phrase, this paper critically analyses four documented case studies on community social protests in South Africa and relevant literature on the protest phenomenon. This way, factors accounting for the spate of protests emerge, providing clarity on the accuracy of the phrase, which has fairly established itself in the discourse of (local) government performance. Finally, the paper examines some characteristics of ‘service delivery protests’, including frequency/pervasiveness, violence, seasonality, and urban prominence.
Motivation for this study springs from two sources. First, Sinwell (2011:66) indicates that, although serious attention has been given to protest and resistance in the literature of post-apartheid South Africa, treatment has been limited and superficial, and the voice of the poor has often been dismissed. Secondly, Duncan (n.d.:n.p.) laments the absence of research by South Africa’s research institutions and universities, hence the little knowledge we have about protest action and its underlying processes, despite “… the centrality of protest in our national politics”. According to Duncan, the dearth of research leaves a gap in the ethnography of protest, making it impossible to fully understand this ubiquitous phenomenon. This paper represents an attempt at addressing these concerns.

The four documented case studies used in this investigation are: Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality (May 2005), Matjhabeng Municipality Phomolong’s ‘volatile Molotov Cocktail’ (February-mid April 2005), Phumelela uprising (September 2004) and Voortrekker’s calling smoke (June 2009). They are chosen for two reasons. First, they present substantial and diverse complaints raised by protesters. Secondly, they highlight increasing violence associated with prominent involvement of the youth, unemployed, poor, marginalized, ‘voiceless’, and informal settlement dwellers and/or township residents in service delivery protests. Finally, the cases represent community protests, devoid of calculated xenophobic attacks that might conflate the investigation. Kirsten and von Holdt (2011:3) highlight “a peculiar combination of absence and unnecessary and provocative violence” of the police and the prominent role of the youth, particularly young men, in collective violence. These issues are not pursued in this paper.

The case studies and literature analysis on which the paper is anchored focuses on the period 2004 to 2011 for three reasons, even though statistics are not provided for the entire period. First, in 2004, South Africa had been under majority rule for 10 years, a reasonable time during which South Africans would have had enough time to reflect on and assess how far they had moved away from the political and socio-economic situation imposed by apartheid and feel justified in venting their discontent in ways that “exposed some uncomfortable truths about the state and wellbeing of local governance in South Africa” (van Donk, 2011:6). Secondly, according to Alexander (2010:25), ‘service delivery protests’ could be traced back to apartheid days, to the 1900s and even to the emergence of social movements after 2000. However, Alexander (2010:25) states that scholars such as Atkinson (2007), Booysen (2007) and Pithouse (2007) agree on dating the current social protest

To contextualize ‘service delivery protests’ sweeping across South Africa since the beginning of the millennium, it is important to acknowledge that the struggle for meaningful social change to bring about a just society has a long history and is by no means over. ‘Service delivery protests’ is a contentious expression. The Ad Hoc Committee on Co-ordinate Oversight on Service Delivery disputes correctness of the phrase ‘municipal service delivery protests’, and refers to it as a misnomer (Parliament of RSA, 2010:5), because local government tends to be blamed for shortcomings that fall outside its mandate (housing, for example). Similarly, Alexander (2010:1) takes issue with the phrase because it does not reflect the variety of issues protestors put forward, does not account for the high degree of violence which characterizes the protests and does not describe the main social forces behind the protests. Alexander and Pfaffe (2011:5) have similar reservations. In place of ‘service delivery protests’, Alexander (2010) and Alexander and Pfaffe (2011) proffer rebellion of the poor as a more appropriate label. On the basis that the protests tend to originate from poorer neighborhoods, shack settlements and townships, rather than suburbs, Alexander (2010:26) describes them as “local political protests” that “place demands on people who hold or benefit from political power”. According to Alexander (2010:26), the protests take on an array of forms: “mass meetings, drafting of memoranda, petitions, toyi-toying, processions, stay-aways, election boycotts, blockading of roads, construction of barricades, burning of tires, looting, destruction of buildings, chasing unpopular individuals out of townships, confrontations with the police, and forced resignations of elected officials”. These forms characterize ‘service delivery protests’ in South Africa. Mitra (1991:9) states that similar forms of protests have been used in India to achieve political ends: stopping all public activity (‘hartal’), refusing to clear an area (‘dharna’), encircling managerial staff (‘gherao’), defying laws in order to get arrested (‘jail barao’), and blocking traffic (‘rasta roko’).

Todes (2006) indicates that, with the adoption of a neo-liberal policy framework in 1996, the poor have increasingly been abandoned in the policy-making process in favor of monetary implications. Gibson (2006) suggests post-apartheid South Africa’s new social movements not only challenge neo-liberal capitalist globalization, but also aim to present alternatives and assert the essence of being human. Thus, rebellion of the poor is an accurate description of attempts by the poorer and marginalized sections of the South African population to initiate social change from the bottom. Duncan (2009:4) points out that, with
the adoption of neo-liberal policies by the Mbeki regime, “protest action became a significant feature of political life in South Africa during Mbeki’s term of office”. Continuing with the neoliberal policies of his predecessor, more ‘service delivery protests’ occurred in the first seven months of Zuma’s presidency than in the last three years of Mbeki’s administration (Alexander, 2010: 28). Williams (2009:9) observes that “these current struggles for social justice are essentially in opposition to neoliberalism, which largely privatizes the basic needs of ordinary people on the ubiquitous market, consequently resulting in the commoditization of every aspect of society”. Against this background, one notes recurrence in service delivery discourse of issues such as grinding poverty, increasing inequality, and rising unemployment, mostly affecting black South Africans. However, Sinwell (2011:66) denies the protests are a challenge to neo-liberalism.

**Historical outline of protest phenomenon**

Williams (2009:6) outlines seven phases of the protest phenomenon in South Africa, namely:

- Pre-1976: a strategic dormant participatory phase, marked by a quest for liberation in the face of oppression and exploitation.
- 1976: the Soweto revolt, which marked the beginning of the struggle by the youth against ‘gutter’ education and in pursuit of national liberation.
- 1977-1983: the death of Steve Biko made the need for community organization, mobilization, and control at grassroots level paramount, culminating in the formation of the United Democratic Front.
- 1984-1989: escalation of struggle into international arena, leading to divestment and boycotts.
- 1990-1994: unbanning of liberation movements and beginning of politically negotiated settlements such as Reconstruction and Development Program and the 1994 Constitution.
- 2000-2004 and beyond: euphoria and hope of post-democratic South African experience of past ten years’ experience fading into disappointment and existential despair.
According to Mottiar and Bond (n.d.:3-4), Ngwane (2010), categorizes post-apartheid South Africa’s ‘protest movement’ into three distinct phases:

- **Phase 1 (mid- to late-1990s):** protests during this phase occurred over dissatisfaction with municipal services, housing, and lack of infrastructure. The anti-privatization strike organized by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and protest by the Mass Democratic Movement, which fell out with the Mandela administration shortly after it assumed power, are examples.

- **Phase 2 (early 2000s):** new urban social movements such as the Anti-Privatization Forum, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee and the Treatment Action Campaign came to the fore during this period. Also prominent was the Concerned Citizens’ Forum of Durban’s Chatsworth Township, which, according to Desai (2002), pioneered a new class politics. The main objective of the new social movements, a motley collection of organizations, was to mobilize the poor and marginalized to take on the state regarding failure or lack of policies for social change.

- **Phase 3 (current protest actions):** refers to non-ideologically inspired local community protests and violent national strikes organized by the Mass Democratic Movement in the 1990s, or new social movements of the 2000s.

Alexander and Pfaffe (2011:1) label protests occurring since 2004 ‘rebellion of the poor’, while Mottiar and Bond (n.d.:21) refer to them as ‘popcorn protests’, because of their tendency to “rise to giddy heights, but fall back quickly, and if the wind blows rightward in a xenophobic way, so too are protesters without ideological background and political training, drawn to attack immigrants as proximate causes for their socio-economic grievances”.

Alexander and Pfaffe (2011:1) note the sweeping of an uncoordinated, widespread and often-violent *rebellion of the poor* across South Africa, a phenomenon whose nature has not been recorded “anywhere in the world in the recent past and nothing similar in South African history”. Given South Africans’ history of employing civil unrest to achieve social and political objectives (Karamoko & Jain, 2011:35), it is perhaps not surprising that protests are a prominent feature of post-apartheid South Africa. It must, however, be emphasized that, even if current protests parallel those of the apartheid era, they are different in terms of their objective. Protests under apartheid were ultimately aimed at bringing down the regime, whereas contemporary protests seek to draw government’s attention to the socio-economic conditions under which some citizens live.
Ramjee and van Donk (2011:11) observe that there is a growing trend for public protests involving communities of interests mobilizing outside of state-sanctioned spaces for engagement. According to the authors, recurrence of protests point to two intricately linked issues. The first is a lack of response by the state and local government to communities’ needs and concomitant failure to clearly communicate reasons for inadequate addressing of citizens’ needs and concerns. The second relates to the inadequacy and failure of structures and processes established by local government legislation for expression of dissent to provide an avenue for fair and inclusive voice of the poor and marginalized. The protests have highlighted “acute gaps in delivery on basic services as well as exposed weaknesses in local government” (Ramjee & van Donk, 2011:12). More importantly, the protests might be an indication that citizens’ participation through formal or official structures, such as voting at elections, izimbizo, ward committees and Integrated Development Plans, are ineffective, resulting in the use of informal participation such as marches, memoranda, and establishment of community structures.

**Theorizing community protests**

Four theories on social protests are advanced here in an attempt to explain the protest phenomenon in South Africa. The first is the insurgency theory advanced by Piven and Cloward (1997). The authors feel that the only strategy open to poor people to advance their social and economic progress agenda is insurgency. Thus the protest phenomenon in South Africa is seen as insurgency or rebellion (Alexander, 2010; Alexander & Pfaffe, 2011), reflecting similar events in other parts of the world. Mass disruptions and defiance have been shown to be effective in achieving the aims of the poor and the working class in the United States of America, especially racial minorities in the 1930s and 1960s. The theory also explains the success of anti-International Monetary Fund protests in Latin America and the Caribbean in the 1970s and 1980s. Further, Bolivian social movement activism against state-business involvement in water and gas between 2000 and 2005 led to the formation of a political movement that eventually unseated a neoliberal government. Albritton (1979:1003) echoes the insurgency theory, in asserting that insurgency is the only channel available to the poor for compelling social and economic progress and advancing their interests.

Without stretching the insurgency theory to breaking point, it could be argued that the poor in South Africa have taken a cue from the anti-apartheid struggle and are mobilizing an ‘insurgent citizenship’ to counter ‘differentiated citizenship’ (Hanson, 2008:7-9, cited in von

The second theory on social protests derives from Polanyi’s (1957) ‘double movement’. ‘Double movement’ refers to the claim that (re)structuring of the economy and society based on ideals of the self-regulating or free market inevitably leads society to reassert itself against the commoditization of land, labor, and money. There are two aspects to the ‘double movement’. The first refers to the late-18th and early-19th century push for a self-regulating market. The idea of separating the economy from the system of societal norms and practices is referred to as “separateness” or “disembeddedness”, as contrasted with “embeddedness” (Polanyi, 1977:48). The second aspect refers to counter movements which Polanyi argues necessarily and spontaneously mobilize against the push for free market reforms. This aspect seems to explain South Africa’s social protests. In the early 1980s, neo-liberal micro-economic and micro-development policies caused disaffection and led to social protests orchestrated by the South African National Civic Organization. The same policies have influenced the protest phenomenon since the late 1990s, especially in the Mbeki era, when costs associated with the commoditization of water, sanitation, and electricity rose alongside increasing poverty, inequality, and unemployment.

The third theoretical perspective is presented by Buccus, Hemson, Hicks and Piper (2007), who see protest as an informal form of participation in local government, complementing formal electoral participation (voting) and participation via official structures (‘invited’ spaces) such as izimbizo, ward councilors and participation in Integrated Development Plans. Cornwall (2002:3-4) carries the protest-as-participation argument further, indicating that two kinds of spaces with different sets of power relations co-exist: ‘invited’ and ‘claimed’/’invented’. Sinwell (2010) defines ‘invited’ spaces as formal channels of participatory democracy, while ‘invented’ spaces reflect ‘self-activity’ spaces citizens create for themselves. The author points out that those participating in ‘invited’ spaces may have to do so within the parameters of those who have done the inviting, leaving them with little freedom to act on their own. In other words, ‘invited’ spaces are formal and constricting.

According to Cornwall (2002:17), ‘invented’ spaces “emerge more organically out of sets of common concerns or identifications … These may be ‘sites of radical possibility’ where those who are excluded find a place and a voice … What distinguishes them is that
they are constituted by participants *themselves* rather than created for the participation of *others*. Citizens may choose to ignore ‘invited’ spaces of participation in favor of autonomous forms of action (protests), which enable them to “create their own opportunities and terms of action” (Cornwall, 2002:3-4). Thus, ‘claimed’ spaces are unbounded. When ‘invited’ spaces are unlikely to yield desired results, citizens resort to ‘claimed’ spaces. To borrow Booysen’s (2007:22) terminology, South Africans now exercise their democratic right “with the ballot and the brick”. This means “… changing gears – away from a sole reliance on the mechanism of voting and representation and towards the grass-roots application of mechanisms, using both voting and protest as a means to obtain more effective service delivery”. Booysen (2007:31) adds that “the South African local electorate … appears to believe that ‘voting helps and protest works’ when it comes to deciding on a repertoire of action to optimize service delivery in communities”, hence the ballot and brick strategy.

Thompson and Nleya (2010:1) state that: “the importance of protests in overcoming the apartheid state remains etched in the psyche of many South Africans”. This might explain the propensity for citizens to resort to protest action and the consequent high number of such actions recorded between 2004 and early 2011. The authors echo Cornwall (2002) in acknowledging that protests occur on a continuum of participation. In the view of Thompson and Nleya (2010:19), “protests are in fact a sign that citizens engage in ways that allow them to define their citizenship and their place in South Africa’s democratic trajectory in a favorable way”. Ramjee and van Donk (2011:22) reflect this view in suggesting that state-provided or ‘invited’ spaces restrict citizens’ ability to effectively voice their concerns, asserting that “it is hardly surprising that communities have elected to engage the state in their own spaces and on their own terms”.

The fourth and final theory is the resource mobilization theory which, according to Klandermans (1984), underlines the salience of structural factors such as availability of resources to an organization or group and the position of individuals in social networks. This theory is diametrically opposed to traditional social-psychological theories, which focus on what attracts people to participate in social movements. Rather, the theory predicates participation in protest on a rational decision-making process, where individuals weigh the costs and benefits of participation. According to this theory, then, protesters make rational choices based on what they perceive they might gain or lose by engaging in protest and act according to their assessment. That protest action is ubiquitous in South Africa would seem to suggest protesters realize some gains, however defined.
Analysis of Documented Case Studies: Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality protest

On 12 May 2005, service delivery related unrest started at Kwadonga, Motherwell, in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan (NMBM) area or Greater Port Elizabeth, in the Eastern Cape. The unrest eventually spread to surrounding areas. The youth, particularly the unemployed and school children, many of whom lived in informal settlements, played a leading role.

According to Botes, Lenka, Marais, Matebesi and Sigenu (2007:77), four categories of reasons account for the unrests, namely: structural, systemic, locality-specific and program or project-specific factors. These are explored in the following sections.

Structural factors

Structural (or external) factors, discussed by Botes et al., 2007:78), refer to factors beyond the control of the municipality. These factors included issues such as prevailing conditions of poverty, inequality, unemployment, past legacies, and other negative circumstances. These factors are, in themselves, ideal sources of social protests and need to be addressed alongside service delivery, rather than service delivery being superimposed on them.

A major factor in the protests was poverty, with its accompanying socio-economic conditions, and unemployment, which South Africa, as a developing country, faces. These problems pose a formidable hurdle to service delivery and sustainable development.

A second factor was the amalgamation of Uitenhage, Despatch, and Port Elizabeth into the NMBM municipality. The incorporation had adverse effects on the ability of these municipalities to render normal service delivery and maintenance functions optimally, since it took time to integrate the different administrative systems of the different entities.

Thirdly, retrenchment of key qualified and experienced technicians as a consequence of the amalgamation resulted in weak capacity, because scarce specialist knowledge and skills had been lost. With more administrative staff, fewer technical personnel and the municipality’s inability to replace the latter, managing infrastructure and maintaining quality service delivery were severely affected.

South Africa’s slow economic growth rate of five percent at the time made it difficult for the NMBM municipality to keep pace with providing adequate services because of supply
problems in the built environment sector. This was exacerbated by national government’s erratic allocation of housing subsidies to provinces to meet housing needs.

There has also been tension between demographic and economic growth, on the one hand, and the municipality’s ability to provide adequate services, on the other, rapid population growth of 2% per annum was fuelled by rural-urban migration from depressed areas of the province, where local economies are unable to provide employment opportunities. Combined with the then high economic growth rate at the time, it resulted in shortage of serviced land. This has put pressure on infrastructure and local service-delivery systems in the metropolitan area. To exacerbate the situation, the manufacturing sector had been declining.

Finally, the much-talked-about dual economies phenomenon, which characterizes post-apartheid South Africa and produces economic inequities, has been held to account for the NMBM area unrests. The Eastern Cape, and Nelson Mandela Bay by extension, exhibits the sharpest contrast of the dual economies phenomenon. In the metropolitan area a modern, expanding motor industry valued at 27% of South Africa’s poorest families co-exist.

**Systemic factors**

The second layer of reasons for the protests, extensively discussed by Botes *et al.* (2007:79-90, are related to issues such as policies and practices of national and provincial government; weak inter-governmental relations; unfunded mandates; inefficient municipal governance; inadequate management; improper functioning of local governments; and poor municipal service delivery.

One major factor in the unrest was housing delivery challenges. A number of specific housing issues exacerbated housing delivery, including housing delivery policies and strategies. First, housing policy has undergone three different phases (1994-1999, 1999-2004 and 2004-present) which, since 1994, has affected both the pace and quality of housing. Secondly the lack of housing delivery caused a number of difficulties, namely lack of technical skills among emerging contractors, under-spending by the provincial housing department, non-completion of houses and poor quality of materials used. Other factors were selective housing allocations and process of housing delivery; lack of horizontal equity in housing delivery; and unavailability of serviced residential land.
The second major issue related to unfulfilled promises about housing delivery made by local politicians just before the local government elections. Thirdly were issues of governance. Inter-governmental relations showed up poorly. Spheres of government accused each other of failed promises and under-performance in delivering houses. Local authorities blamed provincial government and private developers; councilors blamed municipal officials, while community groups accused local councilors of insufficient communication. In turn, the municipality blamed provincial government for bureaucratization and failing to release housing subsidies in time. The provincial government pointed out limited capacity for quality delivery in the local authority (Botes et al.:2007:84). Delays on housing delivery resulted from the provincial and local government financial year being different.

An already bad situation was worsened by the provincial government’s role in funding new housing. It placed a moratorium in 2004 and 2005 on the grounds that the municipality was under-spending and had not completed some projects.

At local government level, the role and responsibilities of councilors and accountability relationships are unclear. Although councilors select and monitor programs and projects, they do not manage. This has led to their being labeled anti-developmental and unresponsive. Also instrumental in the unrests was disjuncture between development objectives in Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and broader community needs, as well as issues relating to corruption and self-enrichment.

The fourth factor related to the role of the media in escalating the protests through sensationalism, that is highlighting issues protesters had not even complained about, while and a rift between the ANC and the South African Communist Party constituted the fifth factor. Also, ex-councilors were said to be behind the scenes, strategizing for the forthcoming local government elections.

**Locality-specific factors**

These included issues at the local (ward) level, such as personality clashes between ward councilors and the people they represent of differences over issues, developmental issues affecting specific areas or yet-to-be-resolved issues (Botes et al., 2007:77).
**Project-specific conflicts**

These factors related to favoritism and nepotism relating to employment on government housing projects, particularly, allegations of the municipality favoring people aligned to politicians, leading to discontent and work stoppage and conflicts between the municipality and developers (Botes et al., 2007:90).

Briefly, then, a number of structural factors, particularly the ubiquitous poverty, inequality and unemployment phenomena, featured in the unrest, as did systemic issues such as housing delivery challenges, dysfunctional governance, and politicians’ activities. Locality-specific and project-specific factors were also important, even if not as prominent as structural and systemic issues.

**Phomolong’s ‘volatile Molotov Cocktail’**

Writing in the *Sunday Independent* of 20 February 2005, Schmidt described unrest that started in the Matjahabeng Municipality town of Phomolong on 4 February 2005 as “a volatile Molotov Cocktail of genuine grievances and about the slow pace of delivery and a runaway rumor of half-baked allegations of corruption”.

According to Botes *et al.* (2007:7), general concerns about service delivery, nepotism, corruption, and slow delivery of housing were ostensibly reasons for the Phomolong protests. Before Phomolong, however, there had been protests in late 2004 and early 2005 in Odendaalsrus (Kutlwanon) and Virginia (Meloding) about preference in appointing Lesotho citizens in the mines over locals; awarding of municipal tenders to outsiders; dissatisfaction with prevalence of the bucket system of sanitation; housing delivery processes; non-communication of municipality’s intentions for the area (Botes *et al.*, 2007:17).

Botes *et al.* (2007:20-25) cite protesters’ grievances for the Phomolong unrest, which were contained in a memorandum of complaints submitted to the Matjahabeng Council. The complaints fell into seven categories, namely: allegations against Councilor Tshabangu; interference with tenders allocated in Phomolong; fronting illiterate community members in connection with the local town hall, RDP houses and municipal service accounts; demand for immediate dismissal of the councilor; immediate launch of investigation into all tenders that had taken place in Phomolong; service delivery; implementation of the Free Basic Electricity policy; tardy provision of waterborne sanitation; a failed promise by the Department of Health to provide a 24-hour clinic in place of the day clinic; housing delivery; uncompleted
housing units, for which action for dereliction of duty was requested; accusations of maladministration; alleged granting of housing subsidies to some people earning above the maximum income limit; allocation of houses to some beneficiaries who had not applied for them; and housing subsidies not having been granted to some people who had applied for them.

Horizontal equity: Phomolong residents did not receive houses built on serviced stands, whereas Hani Park residents did; economic development and employment; residents not benefiting from municipal tenders; greater youth development through learner-ships and youth development by the Department of Labor; leasing of municipal commonage land to white farmers rather than it being used for community benefit; employment and appointment procedures at Matjhabeng Local Municipality; unavailability of job application forms at the Hennenman municipal office at Welkom; advertisement of and employment on merit.

Regional identity: A review of municipalities’ boundaries; unavailability of bursaries for local students; Ward committees; dissolution of Ward Two committee (Tshabangu’s ward); disbanding of Ward Three committee (Democratic Alliance ward); Integrated Development Planning processes; need to launch public educational campaign on IDPs to overcome ignorance and facilitate participatory processes; insufficient and ineffective community participation; lack of regular feedback about progress with the IDP.

A critical evaluation indicates that the list of complaints contained a variety of issues: genuine service delivery concerns, concerns about economic development and employment, housing, alleged corruption and governance issues relating to IDP and ward committees. It is particularly important to note that housing, which is not a local government mandate, and the national issue of corruption feature prominently among the grievances.

**Phumelela unrest**

The Centre for Development and Enterprise report (CDE, 2007) on the Phumelela Local Municipality unrest paints a disturbing picture. In the municipality of three small towns (Vrede, Warden, and Memel) and their respective townships of Thembalihle, Ezenzeleni, and Zamani, poverty and economic stagnation provided the background to an explosive situation. Poverty is reported at 78.2%, making Phumelela the third poorest municipality in the province. Unemployment is at 38.6%, fifth in the Free State (CDE, 2007:9). While the local
economy is declining, an influx of poor, unemployed, low-skilled farm workers has increased the rural/urban population ratio to 40/60, putting a severe strain on service provision.

Infrastructure provision for Vrede, Warden, and Memel is a problem. In 2004, Vrede experienced both water supply problems and poor water quality, with diseases such as diarrhea and skin irritations confirmed. Sanitation became problematic when two of the town’s three pumping machines broke down, resulting in a sewerage spill causing health problems among the town and Thembalihle residents.

In Warden, the water supply was insufficient because of poor planning for drought. Water quality was poor and old pipes often broke. In Ezenzeleni, residents were unhappy about the collection and disposal of sanitation buckets, which were often uncollected for weeks and improperly washed. Sewerage was also being disposed of close to houses. The water system did not work well (CDE, 2007:11).

Water was unpurified and often unavailable in Memel, and sewerage flowed in the streets. Zamani residents complained about non-functioning water-borne toilets and electricity was erratic. Roads in Ezenzeleni and Warden were almost unusable because of potholes.

As a result of problems with water, electricity, sanitation, roads, and service delivery bottlenecks, businesses were negatively affected in an otherwise potentially prosperous tourism environment. The municipality was also said to have failed to engage with business people meaningfully. As a result, no sub-division and rezoning of land for business took place.

Violent illegal protest action, organized by black unemployed people and youth of school-going age, under the banner of ‘Concerned Youth Groups’, started on 14 September 2004 in Thembalihle, and spread to other areas, joined by white ratepayers’ associations. This protest action continued until early November.

During a legal protest march to Phumelela municipal offices in Vrede on 22 September 2004, the following complaints were made: poor condition of roads; high salaries of officials; poor service delivery; inefficient officials; insufficient sport facilities; dirty water; poor condition of roads in Thembalihle; nepotism; allocation of housing subsidies to people earning above the prescribed limit for housing grants; inappropriate spending of available money (CDE, 2007:13).
A demand for the municipal manager to vacate office within seven days was also made.

In Warden, a memorandum of complaints presented on 21 October included the following: inadequate water supplies; pumping of sewage into the local dam; frequent breakdown of water pumps, and failure to repair timeously; erratic removal of sanitation buckets; frequent sewage spills in Ezenzeleni; frequent electricity cuts; erratic voltage; unqualified staff working on electricity system; poor gravel roads in Warden and Ezenzeleni; corruption in allocation of housing subsidies (CDE, 2007:13-14).

During a violent protest in Memel, protesters demanded the following: a functional toilet system; better lighting; sports facilities; action in respect to employment; allocation of sites for housing; a community hall; completion of community projects; another school; land for a cemetery; a clinic; allocation of land for business projects and clean, running water for residents of Extension Two (CDE, 2007:14).

In a combined Zamani/Memel legal protest on 24 September, residents handed in a memorandum of complaints drawn up by the Chamber of Commerce and the Ratepayers’ Association, which listed as complaints: quality of municipal water; lack of bins in Zamani and Memel; lack of maintenance of sewerage pipes; poor condition of streets; blocked gutters; high salary of a never-available municipal manager (CDE, 2007:14).

A demand was made for immediate action

From a critical analytical perspective, it is clear discontent resulted from poor and insecure living conditions, occasioned by poverty and unemployment. Other issues made the unrest inevitable, including: governance problems such as a divided and malfunctioning council, the role of the mayor, conduct and competence of councilors, and empty promises; administrative problems: lack of good labor relations and human resource management, poor relationship between the mayor and municipal manager, bad financial management, weak management, and corruption and nepotism; and provincial government’s housing policy: providing large housing units with low levels of infrastructure, which resulted in inability to phase out the bucket system of sanitation. In short, genuine service delivery issues associated with water, sanitation, electricity, and infrastructure were involved, as were multiple governance and administrative-related and policy issues.
Voortrekker’s calling smoke

In June 2009, Voortrekker Township was the first place to explode following President Zuma’s rise to power. Although the protest ended within 48 hours, its impact was disastrous: three lives were lost and property destroyed. It took place in the context of growing poverty and inequality in South Africa. At the time of the unrest, 80% of Voortrekker’s employed population earned less than R3200 per month and unemployment was about 33% (Dlamini, 2011:34).

According to Dlamini (2011:35), five sequential events culminated in the collective violence: discontent over a disorganized sports event in April 2009; public launch of the Concerned Group; compiling of a memorandum of complaints on June 15 which was faxed to the Premier, district mayor and President Zuma in Johannesburg; a mass peaceful march from the township to municipal offices; failure of the Mpumalanga Premier to arrive for a mass meeting on June 28 to hear residents’ long-standing complaints about corruption and poor service delivery.

A memorandum of grievances drawn up on 15 June by the Concerned Group, “a group of political entrepreneurs” which “grew out of political and personal divisions within the municipality” (Dlamini, 2011:40) and instrumental in organizing the protest, included the following: inadequate service delivery; tariff increases, without any indication of how the money is spent; misappropriation of funds; nepotism and other unacceptable employment practices; poor implementation of the municipality’s development plan; failure by the municipality to deal with community concerns; corruption in the local traffic licensing office; lack of accountability among councilors (Dlamini, 2011:41-42)

According to Dlamini (2011:35), poor organization of the Mayoral Cup, for which R150 000 had been budgeted for refreshments, prizes and cash, and with 70 signed up teams, caused widespread discontent. The immediate cause of the protest and accompanying violence, however, was failure of the Mpumalanga Premier to come for a pre-arranged meeting with residents at the local stadium on 28 June, to hear their complaints. This was construed as a slight, reflected in the following statement: “The premier undermines us. He’ll see the smoke we’re calling him” (Dlamini, 2011:35-36), which the author correctly interprets as using collective violence to coerce the powerful to acknowledge the dignity and legitimacy of the powerless and hear their collective demands.
Protesters burnt tires, erected barricades and stopped all vehicular traffic. The community clinic, community hall, public library, municipal offices, three private cars, three municipal trucks, the mayor’s house, and two councilors’ houses were set alight. Foreign traders, mainly Indian and Pakistani, were driven out of their shops, which were looted. The mayor and four councilors were forced out of the township.

According to Dlamini (2011:44), the protest had three major themes. First was a sense of injustice based on different forms of exclusion; secondly, corruption and indifference within the municipality; thirdly, ANC factionalism. Exclusion involved three aspects: political exclusion, particularly from participation in decision-making; exclusion from services essential to living a productive and dignified life, which amounted to structural violence; exclusion from respectful treatment by municipal officials, representing ‘symbolic violence’.

The Voortrekker violence was triggered by three main factors (Dlamini, 2011:41-43). First of all, genuine grievances existed, including poor material conditions such as bad roads, inadequate housing, electricity, sanitation, and unreliable water supply. The state of roads in Voortrekker was so bad as to warrant a comment that: “We do not have potholes here. We have graves. Our potholes are so big you can bury a child in them” (Dlamini, 2011:42). Secondly, there were deep existing divisions within the executive branch of the municipality and among ANC councilors. Corruption, in the form of patronage networks, ‘politics of excess’ to support extravagance, and ‘local intimacies’ existed. Consequently, the municipality was dysfunctional, distant, and indifferent to the plight of the poor. Finally, internal battles within the ANC to advance factionalism interests and/or acquire wealth constituted the third leg of the triad of trigger factors (Dlamini, 2011:43).

In short, the unrest resulted from a mixture of factors: poverty, inequality, and unemployment; genuine service delivery issues involving provision of water, electricity, and sanitation; bad roads, inadequate housing; bad governance, involving corruption, nepotism, and misappropriation of funds; and factional infighting among ANC members.

**Literature Analysis**

In analyzing factors implicated in community protests from relevant literature, two clarifications are necessary. First, given the volatility that accompanies protests, the media, which often has high visibility during outbreaks and which collects most protest data, does
not routinely interview protesters to establish their motivations. Instead, the media tends to rely on information on placards and reporters’ own evaluations of protesters’ motivations. Secondly, protests do not ordinarily arise from a single complaint. On the contrary, multiple factors are typically involved, although one or a few may be the immediate cause or most prominent. Therefore, while analysis may point to a number of separate issues protesters’ are complaining about, in reality complaints tend to be interlinked.

From 604 community protests occurring between February 2007 and May 2011, Karamoko and Jain (2011:31) identified four major protesters’ complaints of varying instrumentality. Fifty-one percent of protest action related to these complaints. Housing, which featured in 214 instances of protests (21.23%) was the most prominent, almost double the combined second and third major complaints. Specific issues with housing related to lack of access to affordable or adequate housing, deficient, inadequate or unfinished houses and having to wait in vain for RDP houses. This finding is of particular interest because housing is not specifically a local government mandate.

Electricity was the next major complaint, featuring in 109 instances of protests (10.81%). Specific complaints included: unavailability of electricity, high rates for consumed units, and disconnection of their illegal connections. Inaccessibility of clean water was the third major complaint, featuring in 107 protests (10.62%).

Poor service delivery by itself was cited in 100 instances. Inadequate sanitation systems, involving insufficient refuse collection and unsanitary toilet systems, were also a major complaint, occurring in 89 instances of the protests (8.83%). Corruption on the part of government officials was cited in 26 instances, and in 71 instances in combination with other grievances. Other than housing, protesters cited other issues outside the domain of local government, including unfavorable court orders or council decisions (35 instances), unemployment (24 instances), acts such as being prevented from illegally accessing electricity or occupying houses (16 instances), and poverty (seven instances).

Other issues of concern to protesters were broken promises by state officials (38 instances), incompetence/need to hold government officials accountable (33 instances), infrastructure, unemployment, and living conditions. At the bottom of the scale were health, land surveys/allocation, education, safety/crime, complaints against a specific person, poverty, wrongful arrest of another person, police misconduct, and inadequate disaster relief.
In brief, according to Karamoko and Jain (2011), housing, electricity, water and sanitation, and poor service delivery by itself were major motivations behind the community protests. Excluding poor service delivery, the other four accounted for 51.49% of all protests.

‘Service delivery protests’ have achieved such a high degree of notoriety as to engage the attention of Parliament. In August 2009, the House Chairperson Committees on Oversight and ICT commissioned a report on ‘service delivery protests’. The findings revealed a number of causes.

- Lack of/poor service delivery in critical areas such as water, sanitation, electricity, refuse removal.
- Lack of/inadequate housing; evictions; high rate of unemployment; lack of communication with communities; lack of leadership in the municipality; corruption; nepotism; maladministration; financial mismanagement (Parliament of RSA, 2009:ii).

In sum, most protests occurring between 2007 and 2011 were not solely or even mainly service delivery driven. Admittedly, service delivery in itself was a factor, but the fact that housing, which is not a local government mandate, topped the list of complaints, with almost twice as many protests as electricity and water issues combined, is instructive.

**Characteristics of service delivery protests**

Citing Municipal IQ’s data, based on its Hotspots Monitor and employing their own data, Karamoko and Jain (2011) provide insight into community protests from which a number of features are discernible. Five main features stand out, namely: frequency of protests (average number of monthly protests), violence associated with them, seasonal variations, provincial distribution, and urban bias.

**Frequency of protests**

Table 1 indicates the frequency of community protests, according to Karamoko and Jain (2011:4-5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8.78</td>
<td>9.83</td>
<td>17.75</td>
<td>11.08</td>
<td>8.80*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Having increased slightly in 2008, community protests peaked in 2009, but have since been on a decline.

**Violence**

Service delivery protests are often characterized by violence. Violent protests are defined as those where protesters engage in physical acts that either cause immediate harm to persons, or where such acts are likely to result in harm (Karamoko & Jain, 2011:10). Non-violent protests involve marches to hand over memoranda of grievances or instances where protesters peacefully assemble in public areas. This definition includes protests where threats of violence are initially made, but not carried out. Karamoko and Jain (2011) admit the distinction is subjective, as it fails to differentiate between initially peaceful protests and those later turning violent because of circumstances such as police action. Nevertheless, the violent/non-violent protest dichotomy is important in providing insight into the regularity with which protests turn violent, an indication of protesters’ discontent. Acts of violence include a range of practices: blockading of major highways, erection of barricades, burning of tires, burning of public buildings and politicians’ houses, looting of shops, stoning of police, and immobilization of armored vehicles (Alexander & Pfaffe, 2011:4). Table 2 provides statistics indicating a trend towards increasingly violent protests, which is thought to be closely associated with the size of the protest.

Table 2: Percentage of violent protests showing peaks and troughs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violent</td>
<td>41.66</td>
<td>38.18</td>
<td>44.16</td>
<td>55.64</td>
<td>59.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>45.45</td>
<td>52.38</td>
<td>73.33</td>
<td>61.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>23.08</td>
<td>34.28</td>
<td>21.95</td>
<td>35.29</td>
<td>55.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Extracted from Karamoko and Jain (2011:12)

*Up to July
According to a Parliamentary report on service delivery protests (Ad Hoc Committee of Parliament, 2009:iv), violent protests are attributable to a number of factors, including:

- Aggression occasioned by frustration
- Ramifications of economic downturn
- Reinforcement of violence as being ‘acceptable’ in families and communities
- Xenophobia and competition for jobs and resources
- Availability of, and easy access to, fire-arms and other weapons
- Alcohol or substance abuse
- Exploitation of protests by gangs or criminal elements

**Seasonality**

Winter months tend to have more protests than summer months. Statistics in Table 3 support this. According to Karamoko and Jain (2011:9-10), four reasons explain this phenomenon. First, the need for electricity (for heating purposes) is felt more in winter than in summer. Secondly, winter storms and flooding cause destruction, prompting communities to voice their plights. Thirdly, the need for good shelter for the poor escalates in winter because of bad weather. Lastly, the quality of coastal water deteriorates in winter because of contamination by urban pollutants, prompting more agitation for better quality water.

Table 3: Seasonal variations in protests per month

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>8.73</td>
<td>9.83</td>
<td>17.75</td>
<td>11.08</td>
<td>no data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10.67</td>
<td>28.67</td>
<td>7.33*</td>
<td>no data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>10.33</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>no data</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Extracted from Karamoko and Jain (2011, p.8)

*Lower figure attributed to FIFA World Cup, hosted by South Africa

**Distribution**

Table 4 shows the provincial distribution of protests. On a year-to-year basis, Gauteng recorded the highest number of protests, on average, followed by the Western Cape, 17%; the
Eastern Cape and North West, 11% each; KZN, 9%; Mpumalanga, 8%; Free State and Limpopo, 5% each; and Northern Cape, 2%. The aggregated provincial distribution between February 2007 and May 2011 is shown in the last cell of the table (Karamoko & Jain, 2011:23-24).

Table 4: Provincial distribution of protests (in percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Eastern Cape</th>
<th>Gauteng</th>
<th>Free State</th>
<th>KZN</th>
<th>Limpopo</th>
<th>Northern Cape</th>
<th>North West</th>
<th>Mpumalanga</th>
<th>Western Cape</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>12.50</td>
<td>29.17</td>
<td>7.29</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>11.46</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>17.71</td>
<td>no protests</td>
<td>12.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>35.75</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>11.86</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>13.56</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>22.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>13.15</td>
<td>29.11</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>8.45</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>7.51</td>
<td>14.08</td>
<td>16.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>9.02</td>
<td>39.85</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>10.53</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>11.28</td>
<td>7.52</td>
<td>13.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>18.18</td>
<td>13.64</td>
<td>13.64</td>
<td>9.09</td>
<td>6.82</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>6.82</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>22.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*</td>
<td>11.09</td>
<td>13.64</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>9.27</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>11.09</td>
<td>7.95</td>
<td>17.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Extracted from Karamoko and Jain (2011, pp.18-23)

*Reflects figures from January to May 2011

**Aggregated percentages

**Urban predominance**

Service delivery protests have an urban complexion. According to Ramjee and van Donk (2011:23), Municipal IQ’s Municipal Hotspot Monitor indicates that neither the poorest South African municipalities nor those with the worst service delivery performance have experienced the highest levels of protests. Rather surprisingly, protest action has tended to be
highest in municipalities with better service delivery performance in metropolitan areas, ostensibly because such urban areas tend to attract migrants from rural areas with perceived good employment opportunities. Having settled in informal settlements on the fringes of cities, migrants realize a high level of unemployment and fierce competition for scarce resources. Their frustration results from comparing themselves to suburban residents.

That the protests are closely associated with population density and are largely an urban phenomenon is inarguable. According to Karamoko and Jain (2011:25), between February 2007 and May 2011, two of Gauteng’s six district municipalities, the City of Johannesburg and City of Tshwane, collectively recorded 72% of the province’s protests, 52% and 20%, respectively. Similarly, in the Western Cape, two municipalities, the City of Cape Town Metropolitan Municipality, which includes informal settlements in Khayelitsha, Nyanga, and Philippi, accounted for 74% of protests, and Eden Municipality, with Plettenberg Bay and Mossel Bay townships, accounted for 19%, a total of 93% of all protests. With Gauteng and the Western Cape recording 49% of South Africa’s protests (Karamoko & Jain, 2011:26), it is difficult to refute the contention that informal settlements on the fringes of affluent urban areas are flashpoints of South Africa’s service delivery protests.

Citing Municipal IQ, Karamoko and Jain (2011:24) conclude that protests result “from the relative deprivation members of a community feel when compared to their more affluent neighbors” and that communities “languishing at the periphery of municipalities” in metropolitan areas are more likely to protest (Karamoko & Jain, 2011:25).

Conclusion

Perhaps it is appropriate to conclude by citing Carrim (2010), former Deputy Minister for Local Government, on the protests:

Most of the protests are about service delivery issues. But they … are also about a range of other municipal issues, including maladministration, nepotism, fraud, corruption and the failure of councilors and administrators to listen to residents. But it is the rage of sections of the protestors and the extent of violence and destruction they wreak that is striking. It reflects a far more fundamental alienation of people from our democracy. It suggests an acute sense of marginalization and exclusion. … the nature and scope of the protests we are witnessing are not part of a healthy, growing democracy.
‘Service delivery protests’, however inaccurate the phrase might be, have earned an unenviable place in the discourse of South African government performance. Analysis of documented case studies and literature suggest multiple reasons for community protests. Although service delivery issues such as access to water, sanitation, and electricity commonly feature among protesters’ complaints, they are usually not the only, or even overriding, concerns. Housing, the most cited reason for protests is not the domain of local government. A triad of vicious, structural socio-economic factors, namely poverty, inequality and unemployment, has been consistently present. Their superimposition on systemic/institutional, local- and project-specific factors impacting on service delivery creates an explosive situation. Although the protests cannot be blamed squarely on lack of/poor service delivery by local government, they still qualify as ‘service delivery protests’ because, as Dlamini (2011:44) observes:

… ‘service delivery protests’ often involve community protests that go beyond the specifics of service delivery to include grievances about local government. So service delivery is not simply technical and managerial, but deeply political as it structures a power relationship between the state and its citizens.

Booysen (2009:129) notes that, although ‘service delivery protests’ are ‘grassroots’ actions, they are increasingly triggered by national-level responsibilities, including housing, land and jobs. That ‘service delivery protests’ are not solely motivated by service delivery considerations does not provide any comfort for local government, because it deals directly with citizens and necessarily has to absorb frustrations aimed at provincial and/or national government. The tide of protests will begin to fall only when concerted and relentless efforts are made to make the lives of ordinary South Africans meaningful and dignified, by comprehensively addressing the three vicious structural socio-economic evils (poverty, inequality, and unemployment) alongside the main institutional obstacles to seamless service delivery: corruption, nepotism, and self-enrichment; and lack of administrative, technical, and financial skills at relevant tiers of government. This is a task of gargantuan proportions.

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