RedFame

Studies in Media and Communication
Vol. 15, No. 1; March 2027
ISSN: 2325-8071 E-ISSN: 2325-808X
Published by Redfame Publishing
URL: http://smc.redfame.com

Communication Gaps and Service Delivery Protests in King Sabatha Dalindyebo Municipality

Lethu Fuzile[1], Zwakele B. Ngubane[1], Veena Parbo Rawjee[1], Faith Tinonetsana[1]

[1]Durban University of Technology, South Africa

Correspondence: Faith Tinonetsana, Durban University of Technology, South Africa.

Received: February 3, 2026 Accepted: November 16, 2026 Online Published: November 19, 2026

doi:10.11114/smc.v15i1.9537 URL: https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v15i1.9537

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between communication breakdowns and service delivery protests in King Sabatha Dalindyebo Municipality (KSDM), South Africa. The study used a mixed-methods research design. Data was collected through structured questionnaires administered to 434 households and an in-depth interview with the municipality's communications officer. The questionnaire produced a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.979, indicating high internal consistency. The findings show that municipal communication was weak, irregular and ineffective, while residents reported low levels of trust and limited use of formal feedback channels. Many residents felt ignored and lacked confidence in the municipality's transparency and responsiveness. Poor communication, together with poor service delivery, was linked to frustration and protest action. The residents' experiences differed from the municipal officer's account, which stated that communication occurred when required and that community members were able to raise concerns during meetings. This difference highlights a gap between the existence of formal communication activities and residents' experiences of them. The findings are not aligned with Grunig's two-way symmetrical communication model, which promotes balanced dialogue and mutual understanding. The study recommends community-specific communication plans, a transparent feedback and monitoring system and accessible two-way communication platforms beyond municipal meetings.

Keywords: service delivery, protests, municipality, poor communication

1. Introduction

South Africa has witnessed an increasing frequency of dramatic service-delivery protests (Alexander et al., 2018; Allan & Heese, 2011; Booysen, 2009; Chigwata, O'Donovan & Powell, 2017; Municipal IQ, 2014). South Africa's protest methods in the past include boycotts, submission of memoranda of grievance, marches, mass community meetings, barricading roads, burning tyres, burning municipal buildings and land occupations (Alexander, 2010; Tshishonga, 2015; von Holdt et al., 2011). Mainstream media (television, newspapers, and radio news) often report a rising trend of service delivery protests (SDPs) becoming violent, although the accuracy of such reports is questionable.

Service delivery protests in South Africa are often caused by the state's failure to meet basic public expectations around electricity, water, housing and sanitation. Each constituency has different grievances, but they are always linked to poor or no service delivery (Nleya, 2011; Mamokhere, 2020). Further, Naidoo & Maharaj (2015) and Mngadi (2021) highlight that poor communication between municipal officials and communities contributes to service delivery protests in South African constituencies. The authors suggest that effective communication and community participation in decision-making processes help prevent service delivery protests.

In KSDM, similar issues have been reported. Service delivery protests have become a recurring challenge in KSDM. Issues such as limited financial resources, poor infrastructure, lack of institutional capacity and corruption have been cited as root causes. Less attention has been given to communication failures between the municipality and the communities it serves. Despite growing dissatisfaction among residents, there is limited understanding of how poor communication, such as the lack of updates, minimal public engagement and unresponsiveness to grievances, contributes to public frustration and protest action. Findings from previous investigations (Gwayi, 2010) and national assessments (IDASA, 2010) point to weak governance structures and inadequate public participation mechanisms in many municipalities, including KSDM.

This study examines how breakdowns in communication between the municipality and the community contribute to the rise in service-delivery protests in the KSDM. The study addresses the following research question: How do

communication failures fuel protests? The following sections of this study present a review of relevant literature, explain the research methods used, analyse and discuss the results and conclude with key recommendations and final remarks.

2. Literature

Causes of service delivery protests in municipalities

In many South African municipalities, poor service delivery has increasingly resulted in public protests. Constituencies express "dissatisfaction" with the quality of basic services like electricity, water and sanitation. There are many factors contributing to the protests, and two that align with the study objective are outlined below.

Poor service quality

Even where basic services are provided, they are often of low quality, leading to dissatisfaction among the villages. Inadequate waste management, poor road infrastructure and uncollected refuse also influence service delivery protests (Shah, 2011). Also, Mashilo & Kgobe (2021) and Thobakgale & Mokgopo (2018) argue that corruption affects the value for money and quality of public services delivered by local government. Citizens are robbed of quality services due to corruption in tendering (Mpehle, 2012). South Africa's democratic government inherited a weakened public service system, which continues to undermine service delivery standards and professional conduct (Ngwakwe, 2012). Kgobe (2020) argues that public trust in local authorities is undermined by recurring service delivery failures, which contribute to growing dissatisfaction and protest behaviour.

Ineffective Communication Strategies

Citizens cannot hold public officials accountable for poor service delivery because there is inadequate access to clear, timely information, and weak communication systems continue to limit public engagement and oversight, leading to increased protest action (Semberya, 2011). Municipal officials often act as gatekeepers rather than mediators who assist communities in understanding municipal issues through effective communication. The frequent occurrence of protests, many of which involve violence, shows how bad communication channels between municipalities and communities have broken down. In many cases, officials make little effort to educate the public about the conditions under which they operate (Okon, 2017).

Poor communication between municipalities and their constituents often leads to misunderstandings and frustration, which can result in service-delivery protests. These protests could be reduced through effective communication strategies that inform communities about the challenges local governments face in delivering services (Mkhatshwa-Ngwenya & Khumalo, 2020). Similarly, Ndasana, Vallabh & Mxunyelwa (2022) report that community members in Duncan Village complain about not receiving feedback after meetings with councillors and argue that officials often make empty promises, which eventually leads to violent protests as residents try to hold them accountable.

Government Communication

Covello, McCallum & Pavlova (1989) describe government communication as the range of activities carried out by public institutions to share information with citizens. These activities are mainly intended to explain government decisions and actions, strengthen the legitimacy of public interventions, protect shared values and support social cohesion. They further argue that local government plays a central role in delivering services to communities and should therefore prioritise regular communication with citizens, uphold public values and ensure access to services.

Jensen (2016) emphasises that openness is essential for effective communication between government and local stakeholders. The report highlights the need for communication to be clear, direct and sincere and encourages the use of appropriate and accessible communication platforms. Jensen (2016) also explains that many communication challenges arise because governments tend to focus too much on media coverage and public image instead of engaging directly with citizens and responding to their actual needs. Similarly, Kettl (2015) observes that governments often place greater importance on how they are portrayed in newspapers and online platforms than on fulfilling their commitments and meeting public expectations.

"Government is obliged to inform the citizens about the daily happenings of the municipality, and the government must have a plan in place on how to disseminate information in order to reach everybody that the municipality serves" (Njenga, 2009). From the government's perspective, the media play an important role in public communication and significantly influence how policies and actions are perceived by citizens. Government institutions are expected to inform communities about their plans and policy responses while remaining open to public feedback and suggestions. Pepinsky, Pierskalla & Sacks (2017) argue that wide reach and large audiences of media platforms make them powerful tools for information sharing. By shaping how political events and issues are presented to the public, the media influence everyday interactions with politics and help create the environment in which political participation takes place. In addition, the media functions as key channels through which government officials, administrators and policymakers monitor one another's activities and remain informed about ongoing developments.

Government Communication Challenges

Numerous reports on service delivery protests show that the government is somehow failing its constituencies (Karamoko, 2011). Table 1 presents service delivery protests in South Africa from 2007 to 2011 (Karamoko, 2011).

Table 1. Delivery protests from 2007 to 2011

Year	Percentage of service delivery protests/other protests
2007	8,73%
2008	9,83%
2009	17,75%
2010	11,08%
2011	8,80%

Source: Karamoko (2011)

Karamoko (2011) observes that many protest actions arise because community members are unable to engage directly with government officials when they wish to raise concerns, and because of limited opportunities for public involvement in decision-making processes. Njenga (2009) similarly notes that communication within government structures is often restricted to a small group of individuals rather than reaching the broader community, which weakens transparency and public participation. Njenga (2009) states that "unless people are involved, appropriate media are used and messages reflect the relevant variety of realities, communication will still remain a pipe dream." These challenges, which arise from one-sided and unequal communication practices, can be addressed by adopting a two-way, symmetrical communication approach that promotes mutual dialogue between government and communities (Sanders, Crespo & Holtz-Bacha, 2011).

In efforts to improve communication, it is also important to recognise that language remains a major obstacle within many municipalities. The way government communicates plays a central role in shaping public understanding, and inappropriate or inaccessible language can limit effective engagement. As a result, existing language practices continue to hinder meaningful social, political and economic transformation. "This issue should therefore be dealt with taking into consideration the fact that in most instances messages are communicated through the medium of English, with insignificant efforts made to translate the information into indigenous languages" (Ndaba, 2014). A clear example can be seen in KSDM, where the population is entirely Black, yet most communication with external stakeholders is conducted in English. This creates serious challenges because many community members struggle to understand the messages being shared, which limits their ability to respond and participate meaningfully. As a result, important viewpoints are often excluded from decision-making processes. To support meaningful transformation, indigenous languages should be given greater priority in official communication, in line with constitutional requirements.

Excellence Theory of Public Relations

This study is guided by the Excellence Theory of Public Relations, particularly the Two-Way Symmetrical Communication Model proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984). The theory emphasises the importance of mutual understanding, dialogue and ethical communication between organisations and their publics. It argues that effective public relations are based on building long-term relationships through open and balanced communication. Van Dyke & Verčič (2009) regard this approach as the most effective form of public relations practice. However, despite its effectiveness, the model is reportedly adopted by only a small proportion of organisations, estimated at approximately 15%, which may help explain the persistence of communication-related conflicts in municipal contexts. This study therefore examines how KSDM's failure to adopt symmetrical communication practices contributes to public frustration and protest behaviour.

3. Method

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods. Open-ended questions were used to collect data, and an unstructured interview was conducted with the Communications Department within the KSDM. The questionnaire was translated into the native language to ensure all participants understood the questionnaire. Data was collected from residents of four areas: Mqanduli, Ngangelizwe, Mandela Park and Zimbane. The researcher and assistants distributed 434 questionnaires through systematic random sampling, selecting one household randomly and then every fourth household thereafter. The interview was conducted using purposive sampling to target the Communications Officer within the KSDM. A pilot study was conducted to validate the questionnaire, yielding a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.979, indicating a high degree of reliability and internal consistency. The data collected from the responses was analysed using the latest version of SPSS. The interview with the municipal officer was unstructured; the responses were recorded verbatim and incorporated into the analysis as narrative insights to support and contextualise the findings from the structured community questionnaire.

4. Results

Reliability Statistics

The reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.979, well above the acceptable threshold of 0.700, indicating that the research instrument had strong internal consistency and was highly reliable.

Communication by the municipality

Figure 1 indicates the levels of communication between the municipality and the respondents, and between the respondents and the municipality.

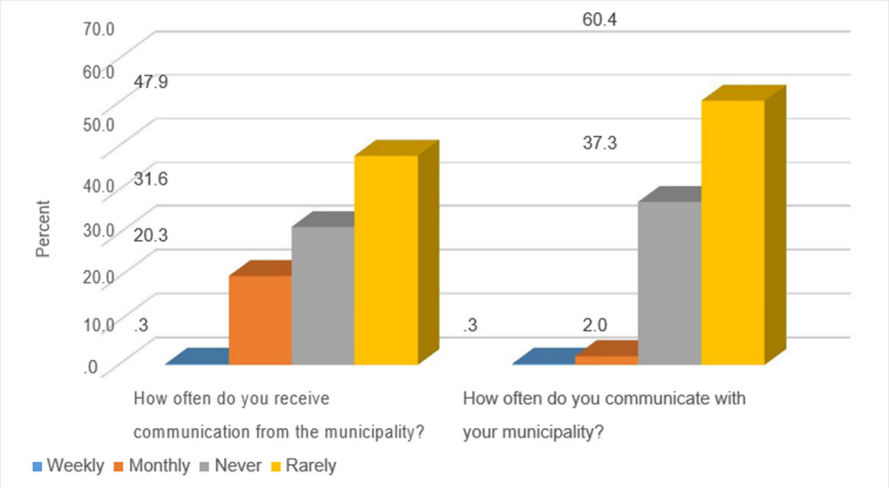


Figure 1. Frequency of communication

This section presents the patterns of communication between the municipality and community members, as well as communication initiated by residents toward the municipality. Figure 1 shows how often participants receive information from the municipality. The results indicate that 47.9% of respondents reported rarely receiving communication, while 31% stated they never receive any. Only 20.3% indicated that they receive communication monthly, and just 0.3% reported receiving communication weekly.

In terms of communication from residents to the municipality, 60.4% of respondents stated that they rarely contact the municipality, while 37% reported that they never do so. Only 2% indicated that they communicate monthly and 0.3% reported weekly communication. The participants were drawn from different areas within KSDM, showing that these patterns are widespread across the municipality.

The findings reveal limited and irregular interaction between the municipality and its external stakeholders, as well as low levels of engagement from community members. This suggests that communication is not treated as a priority by either side. Such weak engagement may contribute to frequent protests and poor service delivery, as effective communication and meaningful participation are essential for responsive local governance.

Channels Used by Respondents to Provide Feedback

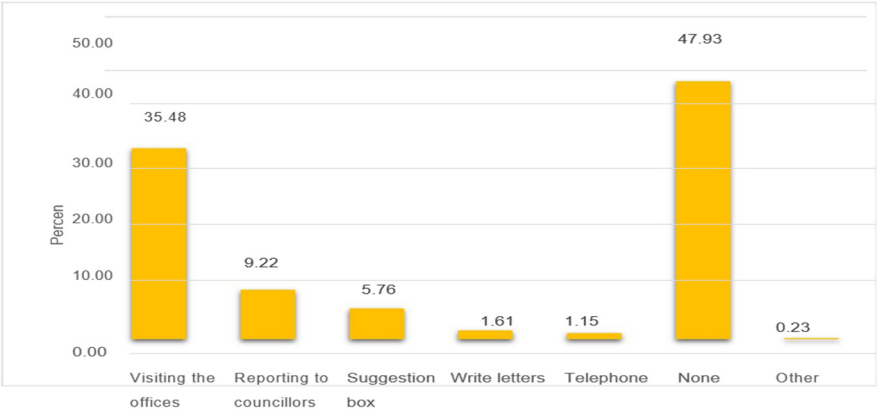


Figure 2. Channels used by respondents to provide feedback

Figure 2 illustrates the different methods respondents used to provide feedback to the municipality. The results show that 47.93% of participants do not use any communication channel to report problems in their communities. About 35.48% reported visiting municipal offices to raise concerns, while 9.22% reported communicating through their councillors. A smaller group of respondents (5.76%) stated that they use suggestion boxes to express their complaints. In addition, 1.61% indicated that they write letters, 1.15% reported using telephones, and 0.23% mentioned relying on other forms of communication. The fact that most respondents do not use any communication channels may reflect a serious breakdown in trust, possibly because previous attempts received no feedback, making communities feel it's no longer worth engaging.

Helpfulness of Available Channels of Communication used by Respondents

Table 2. Helpfulness of available channels of communication used by respondents

	Helpful		Neutral		Not Helpful	
	Count	Row N%	Count	Row N%	Count	Row N%
Visiting the offices	106	74.1%	35	24.5%	2	1.4%
Suggestion box	21	63.6%	10	30.3%	2	6.1%
Reporting to councillors	22	53.7%	19	46.3%	0	0.0%
Write letters	3	50.0%	2	33.3%	1	16.7%
Telephone	2	50.0%	1	25.0%	1	25.0%
None	0	0.0%	12	20.3%	47	79.7%
Other	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	100.0%

The preferred method was visiting the offices (74.1%), followed by the suggestion box (63.6%), reporting to councillors (53.7%), writing letters (50.0%) and telephone. Several respondents (79.7%) indicated that none of the suggested channels is beneficial to their problems, which could indicate that the communication department within the KSD municipality does not pay attention to the opinions of the community; thus, they view all the channels of communication as unhelpful. The findings show that visiting municipal offices was the major preferred communication method, with 74.1% of respondents selecting this option. This was followed by suggestion boxes at 63.6%, reporting issues to councillors at 53.7%, writing letters at 50.0% and using the telephone. However, a large proportion of participants, 79.7%, stated that none of these channels effectively addressed their concerns. This suggests that the municipality's communication department may not be adequately responding to community input, leading residents to perceive all available communication methods as ineffective.

Perceptions of respondents of their municipality

Participants were asked to give their perception of how the municipality communicates with them.

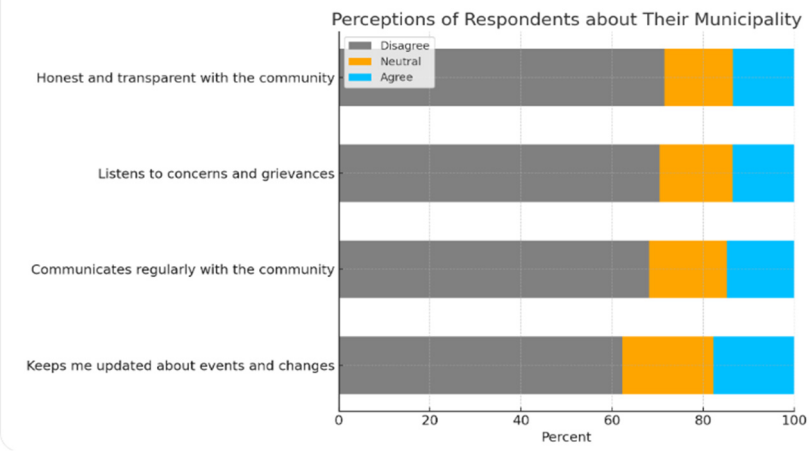


Figure 3. Perceptions of respondents of their municipality

The findings show a lack of confidence among respondents in the municipality's communication and transparency. Figure 2 shows that the levels of disagreement are higher than those of agreement for all the statements above. For example, 62.21% disagreed that the municipality keeps them updated about local events and changes, while 68.21% felt the municipality does not communicate regularly with the community. Further, 70.51% of respondents believed the municipality does not listen to community concerns and 71.54% did not perceive the municipality as honest and transparent. These findings suggest a significant disconnect between the municipality and its constituents. The findings are not in line with the literature by Gino (2012), who says:

Public meetings and imbizos are forms of enhanced dialogue and interaction between the national government and residents at the grassroots level. It is a form of public meeting in which the Mayor or Mayoral Committee Members travel to local communities to communicate programmes and the progress being made. It allows for immediate feedback from the community, which enhances participatory democracy. Communities exercise their right to be heard and can help improve service delivery.

In some situations, government communicators face external challenges that are difficult to control and that negatively affect the flow of information, resulting in weak communication practices. Ramodibe (2014) identifies several barriers to effective communication, including limited financial resources, lack of skilled staff, selective use of language, bureaucratic procedures, cultural values, personal attitudes and individual egos. While certain obstacles, such as personal

behaviour and attitudes, may be difficult to change, municipalities should still make continuous efforts to inform and educate residents about service delivery challenges in their communities.

Chi-Square Test

Table 3. Chi-square test

Statement	Chi-Square	df	Asymp. Sig.
The municipality keeps me updated about events and changes that are to take place in my area	274.612	4	.000
The municipality communicates regularly with the community	307.615	4	.000
The municipality is honest and transparent with the community	279.282	4	.000
The municipality listens to the concerns and grievances of the community	288.795	4	.000

A chi-square test was conducted to understand if participants responded differently to various statements about the municipality. As shown in Table 3, all p-values are less than 0.05, indicating that the observed differences are statistically significant. This means that communities did not respond the same way, and perceptions of the municipality varied by area. While the overall results showed that most participants disagreed with statements, the Chi-square test revealed that these levels of disagreement were not consistent across all communities. Some areas had stronger disagreements than others, suggesting unequal experiences with the municipality. These differences suggest potential inequalities in how information and transparency are managed across areas, emphasising the need for the municipality to ensure more consistent engagement and communication across all communities.

Protests in KSDM

Participants were asked to indicate how often they participate in protests.

Table 4. Frequency of protests in the last 5 years

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	125	28.8	42.1
No	172	39.6	57.9
Total	297	68.4	100.0

The frequency of Engagement in Protests in the Last 5 Years

The findings show that 42.1% of respondents reported taking part in protests in the KSD municipality in the past five years, while the majority, 57.9%, indicated that they had not participated in any protest actions during this period. For a municipality to function effectively, it must engage regularly with community members and work collaboratively with them to address local concerns and meet public expectations. When local authorities fail to cooperate with residents and do not provide adequate information, communities may resort to extreme actions to draw attention to their concerns (Grunig, 2009). In some cases, these actions take the form of protests that may become violent, resulting in damage to public property, such as burning municipal vehicles or destroying municipal offices.

Reaction if the Issues Raised by the Community are not Addressed by the Municipality

Table 5. Reaction if issues are not addressed by municipality

Reaction	Percentage
Just ignore them	85.6%
Write a letter to the municipality	9.4%
Strike/protest	5%

Table 5 indicates that the majority of the respondents, representing 85.6%, choose to ignore the municipality when their concerns are not addressed. A smaller group, 9.4%, reported that they attempt to raise their issues through written correspondence, while 5.0% indicated that they respond by participating in strikes. Even though only 5% of respondents reported resorting to strike action, this remains a significant indicator of underlying dissatisfaction and should not be overlooked, as any level of protest signals deeper communication or service delivery issues. Frustration caused by poor service delivery has led to protests in most municipalities. Madumo (2011) argues that,

"There are a number of reasons that could have been the basis of these protests, but one major cause that most scholars mentioned is communication breakdown between external stakeholders and the municipality. Secondly is the misalignment of the lack of government structures and the lack of public involvement by the community members in decision-making concerning the quality of services".

This finding is consistent with Karamoko (2011), who reports that many protesters are motivated by the absence of accessible government officials when they seek to raise concerns, as well as by limited opportunities for public participation. In addition, Mkhatshwa-Ngwenya and Khumalo (2020) argue that many protest actions could have been prevented through well-designed, effective communication strategies that keep communities informed about the challenges local governments face in providing services. One respondent in a study by Chiwarawara (2023) stated that, "There is a belief that when things are being destroyed the government will quickly answer. It's an idea of fast-tracking

the process, believing that it will do something for the government to respond". These findings suggest that protest action, even when limited, reflects a breakdown in communication and trust between communities and local authorities.

Respondents indicated the causes of the strikes (Table 6).

Table 6. Causes of strikes

	Frequency
Lack of communication	50%
Poor service delivery	50%

Half of the residents indicated they would strike due to a lack of communication, while the other half indicated they would strike if service delivery were poor. These results are in line with previous research which indicates that breakdowns in communication and consultation between local government officials and community members can diminish trust and contribute to protest action, as poor information sharing and lack of engagement fuel dissatisfaction with service delivery outcomes (Msenge & Nzewi, 2021; Mamokhere & Kgobe, 2023; Ngcamu, 2019). Furthermore, Ndasana et al. (2022) report that residents of Duncan Village often express dissatisfaction with the lack of feedback following meetings with their ward councillors and argue that unfulfilled promises by government officials contribute to violent protests aimed at holding authorities accountable.

Insights from Municipal Staff

In addition to the survey conducted among community members, a KSDM staff member was interviewed to provide an internal perspective on the municipality's communication practices. According to the participant, communication with external stakeholders occurs "every time there's a need", especially when new projects are introduced in different wards, during Integrated Development Plan roadshows and at Mayoral Imbizos. The participant stated that these platforms allow community members to express their needs and receive updates about developments in their areas. The participant further reported that public feedback is collected through the municipality's website, newsletters, social media and direct community visits. According to the participant, this feedback is used to identify areas for improvement and activities to continue.

5. Discussion

The findings show that communication between KSDM and its communities is limited, irregular and largely viewed as ineffective by residents. Most residents reported that communication from the municipality was limited or irregular. Communication initiated by residents was also uncommon, pointing to weak interaction rather than an ongoing exchange of information between the municipality and its communities. These findings point to weak interaction between the municipality and its communities rather than an ongoing exchange of information. They support the argument of Mkhatshwa-Ngwenya and Khumalo (2020) that poor communication between municipalities and residents can lead to misunderstandings and frustration. Ndasana et al. (2022) similarly found that residents in Duncan Village were dissatisfied with the lack of feedback following meetings with councillors. The findings from KSDM therefore reflect a wider communication problem within South African local governance, where formal public-participation structures do not always produce regular communication or meaningful engagement.

The limited use of the available communication channels provides further evidence of this problem. Almost half of the respondents did not use any channel to report community problems. Although residents had access to municipal offices, councillors, and suggestion boxes, most viewed these channels as unhelpful. This finding suggests that the communication problem is not limited to channel availability. It also concerns whether the channels lead to feedback or action. Residents may be less willing to use formal channels when previous attempts have not produced a response. This interpretation is consistent with Ndasana et al. (2022), who found that a lack of feedback and unfulfilled promises contributed to dissatisfaction and protest action. It also supports Njenga's (2009) finding that government communication may remain restricted to a small group instead of reaching the wider community. In the KSDM context, the presence of municipal offices, councillors and other feedback channels does not appear to have created confidence that residents' concerns will be addressed.

The results also show low levels of trust in the municipality's communication practices. Most respondents disagreed that the municipality kept them informed, communicated regularly, listened to their concerns or acted honestly and transparently. These perceptions are important because communication in local government is connected to accountability, public participation and trust. Msenge and Nzewi (2021) link citizen participation and public trust to service delivery protests in South African local government. The KSDM findings support this connection by showing that residents who feel uninformed and ignored also regard formal communication channels as unhelpful. The statistically significant differences across the communities further indicate that residents do not experience municipal communication in the same way. Some areas reported stronger dissatisfaction than others. This suggests that communication may not reach all communities with the same frequency or effectiveness. It supports the need for communication practices that consider the circumstances and communication needs of each area rather than applying one general approach across the municipality.

The protest findings must be understood within this wider pattern of limited communication, weak feedback and low trust. A

considerable proportion of respondents reported participating in protests during the previous five years. When asked how they respond when concerns are not addressed, most indicated that they ignore the municipality, while smaller groups use written communication or participate in strikes. Ignoring the municipality should not be understood as satisfaction. When considered together with the finding that many residents view the available channels as unhelpful, it may show withdrawal from formal participation. Protest then becomes one of the remaining ways some residents attempt to gain attention. Karamoko (2011) similarly links protests to the inability of community members to access government officials and limited opportunities for participation. Ngcamu (2019), Mamokhere and Kgobe (2023) and Msenge and Nzewi (2021) also connect communication failures, declining trust and service delivery dissatisfaction with protest action in South African municipalities. The KSDM findings support this literature by showing that communication failures and poor service delivery are connected concerns rather than separate causes of protest. Poor service delivery creates dissatisfaction, while weak communication limits the municipality's ability to explain delays, receive complaints and show how residents' concerns are being addressed.

An important finding is the difference between the municipal officer's account and residents' reported experiences. The officer stated that communication takes place when required and identified IDP roadshows, Mayoral Imbizos, community visits, newsletters, social media and the municipal website as communication and feedback channels. Residents, however, reported irregular communication, limited responsiveness and low confidence in the available channels. This difference does not necessarily mean that the communication activities identified by the officer do not take place. Instead, it shows that the existence of formal communication activities does not mean they regularly reach residents or produce the feedback residents expect. The officer's account focuses on the communication activities provided by the municipality, while residents assess communication according to whether they receive information, obtain responses and see action after raising concerns.

This difference is also important for understanding public participation in South African local government. Meetings and Imbizos may create opportunities for residents to speak, but participation is not complete when residents are only given an opportunity to raise concerns. Meaningful participation also requires the municipality to listen, respond and report what action has been taken. Ndasana et al. (2022) show that meetings can contribute to frustration when they are followed by limited feedback and unfulfilled promises. The KSDM findings add to this discussion by showing a gap between communication as an activity reported by the municipality and communication as an experience reported by residents. The difference may therefore arise from the frequency, reach and follow-up of the municipality's communication rather than the complete absence of communication structures.

The findings can also be explained through Grunig's two-way symmetrical communication model. The model views effective communication as a balanced exchange in which an organisation and its publics share information, listen to each other and work towards mutual understanding. KSDM has several channels through which information and feedback can be exchanged. However, residents' responses suggest that these channels do not consistently support dialogue or visible follow-up. Communication that occurs only "when there is a need" may also be too infrequent to build ongoing relationships with communities. The findings therefore indicate that the municipality's approach remains closer to one-way information sharing than two-way symmetrical communication. Residents may be allowed to raise concerns, but the reported lack of feedback and responsiveness suggests that their input does not always complete the communication process.

The findings show that communication problems in KSDM are not limited to a lack of information. They include irregular contact, limited use of formal channels, inadequate feedback, unequal experiences across communities and low levels of trust. These problems weaken public participation and may increase the likelihood that residents withdraw from formal channels or use protests to obtain a response. The study therefore supports South African local-governance literature that presents service delivery protests as an outcome of both poor services and damaged relationships between municipalities and communities. It also extends the application of two-way symmetrical communication to municipal governance by showing that formal communication platforms are insufficient when residents do not experience regular dialogue, feedback and visible responses to their concerns.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings show that communication between the municipality and community members is weak and irregular. Most residents rarely or never receive information from the municipality, and they also seldom contact municipal officials. This shows that neither side takes communication seriously. As a result, important issues are not discussed early, and problems are allowed to grow. Many residents do not use any communication channels to report problems. Those who try usually visit municipal offices or contact councillors, while very few use phones, write letters, or submit suggestions via suggestion boxes. This suggests a lack of trust in the system. People seem to feel that reporting problems does not lead to action, so they stop trying.

Although some channels are preferred, such as office visits and suggestion boxes, most respondents believe that none of the available channels really help them. This indicates that the municipality may not be responding properly to community feedback. When people feel ignored, they see communication structures as useless. The results also show low confidence in the municipality's honesty, transparency, and willingness to listen. Most respondents disagreed that the municipality

keeps them informed, communicates regularly, or takes their concerns seriously. This points to a serious gap between the municipality and the community. Statistical analysis shows that perceptions differ across areas. Some communities experience stronger dissatisfaction than others. This means service delivery and communication quality differ across locations, leading to unequal experiences.

Regarding protest actions, a significant number of residents have participated in recent years, while others have not. When the municipality fails to respond to concerns, most residents choose to ignore it. A smaller group tries formal communication, and some turn to strikes. Even though fewer people choose strikes, this still reflects deep frustration. Finally, residents reported that strikes mainly occur due to poor communication and service delivery. When people feel unheard and services are weak, they are more likely to express their anger through protest. Findings contradict a municipal officer's claim that there is always communication when needed and that members are allowed to voice their concerns during meetings.

The results clearly show that weak communication leads to frustration, loss of trust and feelings of neglect. When residents do not receive information or feedback and believe their concerns are ignored, they stop using formal channels. Over time, this pushes some community members to protest or strike. Poor communication, combined with poor service delivery, creates conditions in which strikes become a means for residents to force the municipality to listen. These findings highlight a clear gap between current practices and the principles of Grunig's two-way symmetrical communication model, emphasising mutual understanding and balanced dialogue. The municipality is not engaged in two-way or participatory communication. Instead of encouraging open, ongoing dialogue, the communication approach appears one-way and limited, undermining public trust and participation.

Recommendations

Establish community-specific communication plans

Since perceptions vary by area and some communities feel neglected, the municipality should develop targeted communication strategies for each community, ensuring regular and inclusive engagement tailored to their needs and concerns.

Implement a transparent feedback and monitoring system

The municipality must introduce a formal mechanism to record, track, and publicly report community concerns and the municipality's responses to build trust and demonstrate accountability, especially in areas with low levels of transparency and responsiveness.

Two-way communication platforms beyond meetings

Given the disconnect between the official's view and community experiences, the municipality should expand beyond occasional meetings and use ongoing, accessible channels (e.g., SMS updates, WhatsApp groups, community liaisons) to ensure continuous dialogue and reduce reliance on protest as a communication tool.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Author contributions

L.F. and Z.B.N. contributed to the study conceptualisation, research design and manuscript drafting. V.P.R. contributed to the study conceptualisation, methodological development, critical review and revision of the manuscript. F.T. contributed to the research methodology, data analysis, interpretation of findings and manuscript review and revision. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript for publication.

Funding

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

References

Alberts, G. (2011). *The role of external government communication on service delivery at Mangaung Local Municipality* (Doctoral dissertation, North-West University).

Alexander, P. (2010). Rebellion of the poor: South Africa's service delivery protests–a preliminary analysis. *Review of African Political Economy*, *37*(123), 25-40. https://doi.org/10.1080/03056241003637870

Alexander, P., Runciman, C., Ngwane, T., Moloto, B., Mokgele, K., & Van Staden, N. (2018). Frequency and Turmoil: South Africa's Community Protests 2005–2017. *South African Crime Quarterly, 63,* 27–42. https://doi.org/10.17159/2413-3108/2018/i63a3057

Allan, K., & Heese, K. (2011). *Understanding Why Service Delivery Protests Take Place and Who is to Blame*. Municipal IQ, pp. 93-114, municipaliq.co.za

Booysen, S. (2009). Public Participation in Democratic South Africa: From Popular Mobilisation to Structured co-Optation and Protest. *Politeia, 28*(1), 1-27.

Chigwata, T. C., O'Donovan, M., & Powell, D. M. (2017). Civic Protests and Local Government in South Africa. *The Civic Protests Barometer*: 2007-2016, 2.

Chiwarawara, K. (2023). 'Violent protests' in South Africa: understanding service delivery protests. *Politikon*, *50*(3), 242-253. https://doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2023.2257502

Covello, V. T., McCallum, D. B., & Pavlova, M. T. eds. (1989). *Effective risk communication: the role and responsibility of government and nongovernment organizations* (Vol. 4). Berlin: Springer Science & Business Media.

Grunig, J. E. (2009). Paradigms of global public relations in an age of digitalisation. *PRism, 6*(2), 1-19.

Gwayi, M. S. (2010). Service delivery challenges: King Sabata Dalindyebo local municipality: Mthatha. Master's dissertation, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

IDASA (2010). The State of Local Government and Service Delivery in South Africa: Issues, Challenges and SolutionsA paper submitted to the portfolio committee onCooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs Public Hearings for Coordinated Service DeliveryCape TownAugust

Jensen, B. (2016). *The search for communication equilibrium through political public relations: a study into the perceptions of stakeholders of a provincial government department*. Doctoral thesis, Technikon Witwatersrand.

Karamoko, J. (2011). *Community protests in South Africa: Trends, analysis and explanations*. Community Law Centre, University of the Western Cape.

Kettl, D. F. (2015). *The transformation of governance: public administration for the twenty-first century*. Updated edition. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Kgobe, F. K. L. (2020). Africanised Public Administration Sold Out Public Service Delivery: A Case of South Africa. In Sebola, M. P., & Molokwane, T. (eds). *5th International Conference on Public Administration (IPADA)*. 07- 09 October 2020 Virtual Conference. 54-61

Mamokhere, J. (2020). An assessment of reasons behind service delivery protests: A case of Greater Tzaneen Municipality. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 20(2), e2049. https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2049

Mamokhere, J., & Kgobe, F. K. L. (2023). Service delivery protests in South African municipalities: Trends, factors, impacts and recommendations. *Social Sciences and Education Research Review*, *10*(2), 49–59. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15254228

Mashilo, M. T., & Kgobe, F. K. L. (2021). An inevitable dialogue of Ethics – A Conceptual Analysis of the South African Public Procurement Corruption. *European Journal of Economics, Law and Social Sciences, 5*(3), 478–489.

Mkhatshwa-Ngwenya, E. N. M., & Khumalo, P. (2020). Improving service delivery at local government by enhancing capacity. *International Conference on Public Administration and Development Alternative (IPADA).*

Mngadi, S. (2021). *Assessment of service delivery planning in local government with specific reference to Ndwedwe Local Municipality* (Doctoral dissertation).

Mpehle, Z. (2012). Are service delivery protests justifiable in the democratic South Africa? *Journal of public administration*, *47*(si-1), 213-227.

Msenge, P., & Nzewi, O. (2021). A proposed citizen participation–public trust model in the context of service delivery protests in South African local government. *Journal of Local Government Research and Innovation*, *2*(0), a26. https://doi.org/10.4102/jolgri.v2i0.26

Municipal, I. Q. (2014). Municipal IQ condemns the use of excessive force in service delivery protests.

Naidoo, K., & Maharaj, B. (2015). Understanding the dynamics of service delivery protests in South African municipalities: The case of uMgungundlovu District Municipality. *Journal of Public Administration*, *50*(3), 498-512.

Ndaba, N. E. (2014). *A communication perspective of how local government is equipped to interact with its public: a study of the Ulundi Municipality*. Doctoral thesis, University of Zululand.

Ndasana, M., Vallabh, D., & Mxunyelwa, S. (2022). Understanding the Service delivery protests in South Africa: A case study of Duncan Village. *Africa's Public Service Delivery & Performance Review*, *10*(1), 7. https://doi.org/10.4102/apsdpr.v10i1.644

Ngcamu, B. (2019). Exploring service delivery protests in post-apartheid South African municipalities: A literature review. *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, *15*(1), a643. https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v15i1.643

Ngwakwe, C. C. (2012). Public sector financial accountability and service delivery. *Journal of Public Administration, 47*(si-1), 311-329.

Njenga, T. M. (2009). *A critical analysis of public participation in the integrated development plans (IDP) of selected municipalities in some provinces* (Gauteng, Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape) in South Africa. Master's Dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

Nleya, N. (2011). Linking service delivery and protest in South Africa: an exploration of evidence from Khayelitsha. *Africanus*, *41*(1), 3-13.

Okon, P. (2017). The Role of Communication in the Effective Administration of Local Governments in Cross River State of Nigeria. *Public Policy and Administration Research*, *7*(7), 81-87.

Pepinsky, T. B., Pierskalla, J., & Sacks, A. (2017). Bureaucracy and service delivery. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *20*: 249-268. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051215-022705

Ramodibe, M. A. (2014). *An evaluation of the success of the South African government's communication and information system in disseminating information to citizens*. Doctoral thesis, University of South Africa.

Sanders, K., Crespo, M. J. C., & Holtz-Bacha, C. (2011). Communicating governments: a three-country comparison of how governments communicate with citizens. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *16*(4), 523-547. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161211418225

Semberya, D. (2011). EAC lacks budgetary transparency. Available at: http://www.busiweek.com/11/the-eacissues/eac-news/1358-eac-lacks-budgetary-transparency-survey

Shah, A. (2011). *Corruption*. Available at: http://www.globalissues.Org/article/590/corruption.

Thobakgale, M. P., & Mokgopo, T. I. (2018). Public Procurement and South Africa's 1996 Constitution: Panacea for Combating Corruption? *Journal of Public Administration and Development Alternatives*, *3*(1), 41-54.

Tshishonga, N. (2015). The Impact of Xenophobia-Afrophobia on the Informal Economy in Durban CBD, South Africa. TD. *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, *11*(4), 163–179. https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v11i4.52

Van Dyke, M. A., & Verčič, D. (2009). *Public relations, public diplomacy, and strategic communication: An international model of conceptual convergence.* The global public relations handbook: Theory, research, and practice, 822-842.

Von Holdt, K., Langa, M., Molapo, S., Mogapi, N., Ngubeni, K., Dlamini, J., & Kirsten, A. (2011). The smoke that calls: insurgent citizenship, collective violence and the struggle for a place in the new South Africa. *Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR)*, 6.