



Service Delivery Protests in the South African Government: Is Relative Deprivation Leading to an Increase in Protest?

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Abstract

The social insecurity present in the nation has impeded the desired democratic system from thriving in various communities due to the lack of progress since its inception. The municipal authorities continue to grapple with governance and service provision issues within their communities. The 1994 victory sparked anticipation and excitement in society, leading to the expectation of policy changes and the rectification of past imbalances. However, the situation has resulted in discourse, inequality, and conflict among communities and state institutions. Municipal authorities have been at the centre of service delivery protests and their inability to address the needs of the communities they serve. Protests have erupted at all levels of government, with the majority becoming violent and fueled by various motivations. This study aims to evaluate relative deprivation and community protests within the South African context and to explore their relationship. Furthermore, it seeks to provide possible recommendations on how to address this phenomenon. The study posits that service delivery protests are influenced by relative deprivation, which has persisted due to inadequate service delivery. The paper suggests that inclusive policies that encourage public participation and foster trust in state-society relations can alleviate deprivation and protests. The study used a qualitative approach, gathering data from secondary sources and materials.

Keywords: *Relative Deprivation; Service Delivery; Service Delivery Protests; South Africa*

1. Introduction

The South African government according to the Constitution Section 152 (1) (b) is provisioned to guarantee the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner. Importantly, South Africa still holds an image of a perfect model of democracy worldwide, but service delivery protests have continued to reveal a different backstory. The protests take place at a time when most of the population is

reported to be suffering from high levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality (World Bank, 2022). Service delivery challenges are neither new nor unique to the South African government (Mamokhere, 2019). Since the early years of the 1980s, protests have occurred in various states by groups of individuals to bring change in the political administration and to bring about democratic dispensation (Mchunu, 2012). Despite the success of the new democracy, governments are still faced with mounting issues that took precedence over any successes. Service delivery protests are a common occurrence in many places. This is because officials who took office in the new dispensation have only looked after themselves and disregarded most people in the grassroots level. Scholars Alexander (2010), Mbazira (2013), and Nkomo (2017) all agree on this. The local government, represented by municipalities, has been characterized as one of the institutions in terms of service supply. However, for almost two decades, the government has faced obstacles such as inconsistent performance and provision of public services, the lack of human resource development, and corruption (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) 2014). The provision of services is essential in satisfying the needs and expectations of people and meeting their standard of living. The Bill of Rights Chapter 2 highlights this. Service delivery protests started to emerge in the democratic dispensation in 2004, according to Alexander (2010), Breakfast, Bradshaw, and Nomaryi (2019), and Carrim (2010). Raophala (2013) contends that the African National Congress (ANC) 1994 manifesto instilled expectations and increased needs regarding access to municipal services such as water, electricity, free education, housing, and social security. The new dispensation gave hope to citizens for a better life. The question worth answering is why service delivery protests continue in local government given the statutes, policies, and numerous statements of developments and achievements. Allan and Heese (2011) argue that lack of communication and public engagement mechanisms have been an issue for good governance practices (Ragolane and Malatji, 2021). Several studies have demonstrated that there is a correlation between socioeconomic challenges, service delivery protests, and the influence of resource deprivation (RD) (Mchunu, 2012; Mathonsi, 2017; Tapela, 2015; Nnadozie, 2013). Alaxander (2010) argues that these protests are a form of rebellion by the poor, who experience RD due to the underserved conditions of their areas compared to more affluent communities in urban contexts. This lack of service delivery exacerbates protests driven by deprivation in these communities. Allan and Heese (2011) assert that the sense of RD and inequality, particularly in urban areas, is key to understanding the occurrence of protests. They also mention that people become frustrated when they see others receiving services before them, which adds to the marginalization and exclusion felt by communities, as well as the desperation for services and the lack of information from municipalities. In summary, these factors create anger and frustration among community members. There are still communities today that lack access to essential services, while others live in underdeveloped areas with limited economic and social opportunities. Efficient service delivery is crucial to reducing protests related to service delivery. Although there has been some research on this topic, there is still little understanding of the relationship between RD and service delivery protests, particularly in local government. This recent study aims to address this knowledge gap by exploring the connection between RD and community protests. The paper will begin by discussing the concept of RD and its impact on service delivery and protests. The second section will focus on service delivery protests in local government and the rebellion of the poor. Lastly, the paper will propose strategies for effective and efficient service delivery and protest management.

2.Methodology

This paper is focused on qualitative research, which aims to comprehend the methodological characteristics that aid in the exploration of social and human life problems. In particular, the study uses a Desktop Research approach to obtain secondary data, such as journal papers, books, media reports, and online news. The purpose of this methodology is to contribute to a better understanding of the ongoing deliberation regarding service delivery protests in local government municipalities.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Relative Deprivation

The study explores the concept of relative deprivation by examining definitions put forward by various scholars. For instance, Townsend (1987) cited in Fu, Exeter and Anderson (2015) defines RD as "a state of observable and demonstrable disadvantage, relative to the local community or the wider society or nation to which an individual, family or group belongs". This definition highlights the relationship between RD and service delivery protests. Similarly, Smith and Pettigrew (2015) describe RD as "a judgement that one or one ingroup is disadvantaged compared to a relevant referent, and that this judgement invokes feelings of anger, resentment, and entitlement". Several sociologists and political scientists, such as Runciman (1966), Gurr (1971), and Davies (1959), have used the concept of RD to explain social violence and protest behaviors (Tripathi and Srivastava 1981). According to Sharma (1991), Karl Marx's explanation of the idea is the only one that has successfully conveyed the essence of RD. Crosby (1976) and Smith et al. (2012) affirm Marx's assertion that "a house may be large or small; if the surrounding houses are equally small, it satisfies all social demands for a dwelling. But if a palace arises beside the small house, it becomes a hut instead of a small house". Marx's theory is attractive as a social behavior explanation, as stated by Smith et al. (2012). Moreover, when individuals compare themselves to others or groups, they may feel that they are not receiving the respect or happiness they deserve. The concept of relative deprivation has been studied by various researchers to understand social issues and challenges. In 1959, Davies clarified the concept by explaining that in any society, there can be two groups - a non-deprived group that has goods or services, and a deprived group that lacks these goods and services. The deprived group compares themselves to the non-deprived group, and this is where relative deprivation occurs. Chen (2015) describes relative deprivation as a gauge of inequality and an important indicator of equitable growth at the individual level. It describes how those at the bottom of an uneven society feel worse in many ways than people at the top. Isbell (2020) used relative deprivation to assess political trust, demonstrating how people who are perceived to be deprived and their experiences with inequality shape their political and state institutions' trust. Relative deprivation is based on the notion that people who feel deprived are more likely to feel injustice and envy and may resort to violence. In this case, people who are deprived seek to find their status within the larger groups that are deemed to be well off. The concept of relative deprivation (RD), as described by Verme (2013), involves not only comparing oneself to others in society but also comparing oneself to their past status and future expectations. RD is about whether or not one perceives development in their situation and sees a bright future. Gurr (1971) states that as expectations grow, people's capabilities grow, and they want to maintain the same status over time without losing their resources. Verme (2013) adds that progress, as well as status, is essential for happiness, and a group that experiences growth in income is more likely to be happy than one that does not, even if their absolute income is lower. Nleya (2011) used RD to assess social protests and found that it drives protest actions. In instances where people live in poverty, unemployment, and inequality, they are more likely to express their resentment. In the South African context, RD has shaped how people view the government's service delivery provisions, with many feeling that the government has not rectified past imbalances, leading to unequal services at the grassroots level. Based on these concepts, if traditional assessments of theorists like Gurr (1971) are accurate, a decrease in protests would indicate improvement in service delivery. However, it's crucial to note that service delivery frustrations extend beyond water and electricity to municipal performance, local governance, and service quality (Chipkin, Vidojevic, Rau, and Saksenberg, 2021). RD influences protests due to individual frustration with perceived service inequality.

4. Literature Review

4.1. Understanding the Influence of Relative Deprivation on Service Delivery Protests

In communities, protest action is often caused by various factors such as poor service delivery, unresponsiveness of officials, and lack of public participation. However, Resource Dependency (RD) is also considered as one of the causes of protests. According to Mchunu (2012), from the perspective of RD, some certain events and conditions influence protests. These events and conditions highlight the relationship between RD and community or service delivery protests. RD theorists suggest that several factors contribute to service delivery protests and affect the behaviour of protestors. Poverty, unemployment, inequality, and the uneven relationship between the government and citizens are some of the factors that may lead to protests, according to Banderia et al. (2011 cited in Mchunu, 2012). These factors affect citizens' lives daily, as they are structural and cannot be easily solved with short-term solutions. In addition to these structural factors, there are also proximate causes of protests such as poor service delivery, political conflicts, political opportunism, and poor local governance. These proximate causes may trigger collective protests and violence as communities view them as examples of failing municipalities. However, they require medium-term solutions, such as a responsive and accountable government. During RD and protests, the role of the youth, police, political opportunists, and criminals may accelerate protests, while the role of the police and politicians is to maintain law and order and attend to the needs of the people, which can decelerate protests.

4.2. Factors Influencing Community Protests

Banderia and Higson-Smith (2011) argue that problems such as poverty, inequality, unemployment, and the violent relationship between the state and the public serve as prerequisites for collective violence. These problems are structural and affect the general population daily, leading to social tensions, group violence, and conflict behaviors. However, they cannot be eliminated in a short amount of time. On the other hand, proximate reasons such as poor service delivery, political conflict, political entrepreneurship, and weak local government can be resolved by a responsive and responsible government, but they require medium-term prevention. These factors have an impact on collective violence because people view them as failing municipalities in their communities. Although the police, criminal and political opportunists, the participation of the youth, and other factors may not be direct impacts on the protests, they can accelerate them. The role of the decelerators, such as the police and politicians, is to uphold law and order and manage the protest before it degenerates into violence. The authors suggest that these factors indicate the correlation between the RD and protests in communities. The idea is that community members feel excluded or neglected in the provision of services. The Public Servants Association Perspective (PSA) (2015) states that service delivery is a complex issue in South Africa because the infrastructure system was not built to be inclusive, making the restructuring of the system a challenging task to meet the needs of the people in South Africa. Although there has been progress in providing access to water, electricity, and sanitation, the problem persists in underdeveloped areas (PSA, 2015).

4.3. The Occurrence of Community Protests

In local government, communities that feel their needs are not being addressed often resort to protests to express their dissatisfaction. According to Masiya, Davids, and Mangai (2019), this feeling of deprivation is especially prevalent in peri-urban and informal townships, where people feel worse off than other communities, and it often leads to protests. The authors further state that the government's failure to fulfill its promises to the people is often the determining factor in their satisfaction levels. A number of problems contribute to dissatisfaction with service delivery, including apartheid injustices, relative poverty and inequality, exaggerated and broken political promises, and unequal access to services.

Frustration is also caused by a lack of response from authorities and council members, obstructed or murky communication channels, poor service provision, and rising poverty levels (Masiya et al. 2019). Hough (2008) suggests that there are two ways to view violent unrest in local government: one is as a larger issue that could lead to a revolution, and the other is as a smaller issue related to the disappointment of promises that have not been kept about the larger issue, which includes crime, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and the deteriorating economy. Breakfast, Bradshaw, and Nomarwayi (2019) conducted a study in Walmer township in Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality and found that the failure of the municipality created a sense of relative deprivation among black community members who felt neglected and deprived of services. The authors argue that "frustrated basic human needs have led to protest behavior that frequently turns violent. The propositions of basic human needs have been upheld; people cannot be frustrated forever; they will revolt and act destructively." Breakfast et al. (2019) also contend that people living in informal settlements feel deprived of services and are mostly desperate for them. Allan and Heese (2011) also suggest that protests are common in informal settlements because people feel excluded, with growing poverty and no access to economic and social capabilities, and they find themselves comparing their situation to those who have better services. Figure 1.1 in Breakfast et al. (2019) outlines the steps for how these protests develop in townships, with slow service delivery leading to more conflict and violent protests as people feel increasingly deprived of services.

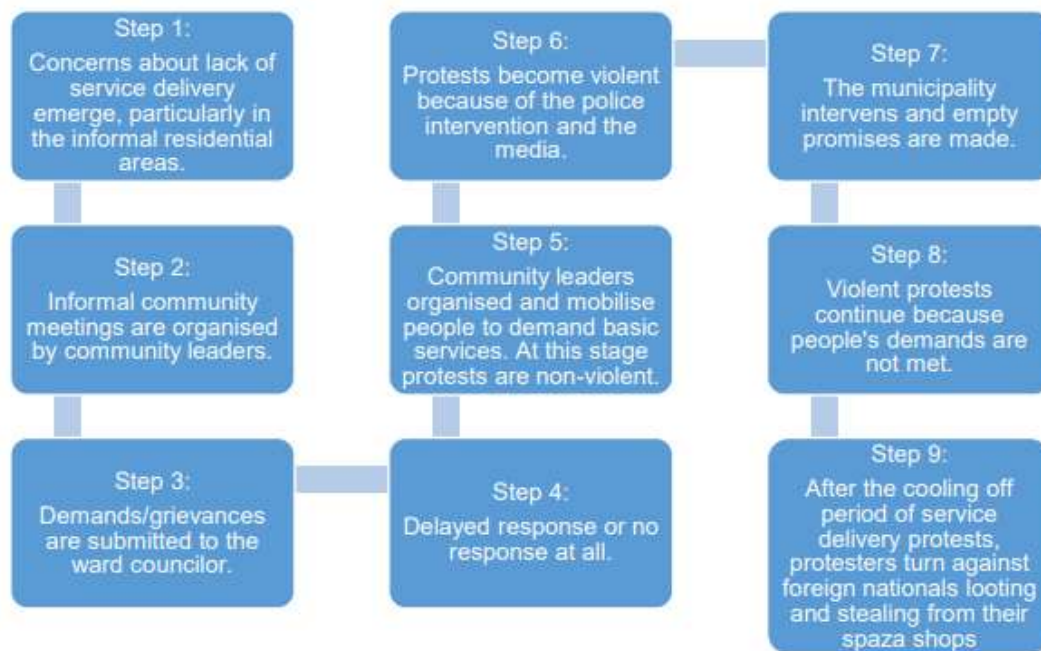


Figure 1: Protest development in Township communities
Source: Breakfast et al. (2019)

Hough (2008) argues that poverty in certain areas can lead to the development of RD (xenophobic attacks). Magwaza (2018) suggests that violent protests often reveal the violence that is associated with foreign nationals from a socio-economic and psychological standpoint. According to Duffy (2000, cited in Mathonsi, 2017), some districts in England are deprived, marginalized, and socially excluded. Residents in these areas often feel that public services do not meet their needs, which can lead to frustration. This frustration can occur when these areas receive poor services, such as inadequate healthcare, education, and police services. Duffy (2000) adds that municipalities should prioritize the delivery of services to these communities, as residents in these areas cannot afford private services. Duffy also highlights that the needs of people in these deprived areas are often not met with high-quality

services, due to the lack of professional and political contacts in these areas. It can also be challenging to recruit and retain high-quality staff to assist in service delivery in deprived areas. RD's theory states that inadequate service delivery in township communities and the gap between expected and achieved welfare leads to social injustice, which in turn, leads to political violence (Magwaza, 2018). The government's lack of response to people's concerns and dissatisfactions regarding service delivery leads to increased vandalism by residents during protests. This is compounded by the government's policies, planning and implementation of projects that have failed to fulfil the communities' expectations, resulting in broken promises and dashed hopes over the year.

According to the PSA (2015), the unequal distribution of services is particularly dangerous, as seeing others with resources that you are denied can generate as much anger as the lack of services in the first place. While any government would struggle to meet the demands of South Africa's transformation, the deep-seated problems in government remain a significant barrier to meeting this challenge. Continued weak service delivery is undermining trust in the government and breeding anger in underserved communities. Corruption and mismanagement in these municipalities also limit the extent of resources promised to these communities. Nnadozie (2013) suggests that a service delivery model in these municipalities would yield impressive results, as it would extend to all demographics, population, and income levels. A study by Masiya et al. (2019) found that respondents stated that the quality and quantity of services provided leads to dissatisfaction, which is most prevalent in black communities. This dissatisfaction is compounded by social status, background, values, and circumstances. De Juan and Wegner (2019) argue that service inequality can lead to the state and government legitimacy being undermined and leading to protests. Dissatisfaction with service delivery is more likely to generate resentment toward governmental institutions than economic factors. The argument is that basic service constitutes a form of direct involvement between the people, actors, and the state, and the state is easily identified as the sole culprit for the deprivation of people on the state-provided services. Therefore, service inequality leads to a decrease in government trust and protests (De Juan and Wegner 2019).

4.4. Service Delivery Provision in Local Government Municipalities

Municipalities are responsible for providing services to their communities. However, many municipalities face various challenges such as corruption, maladministration, lack of public participation, infighting, nepotism, and an unresponsive government. These challenges often result in poor service delivery and can lead to protests. The political-administrative landscape is often to blame for these issues (Reddy, 2016; Masuku and Jili, 2019; Madumo, 2016). Madumo (2016) states that all governments are responsible for ensuring sustainable livelihoods and improving the standard of living of their citizens. Service delivery is crucial in rectifying the deprivation faced by people living in poverty, unemployment, and other challenges. Section 152 (1) of the Constitution requires local governments to provide a democratic and accountable government for their communities, ensure the sustainable provision of services, promote social and economic development, and encourage community involvement in local government matters. According to the ISS Public Violence Monitor study, most demonstrations in the past three years have been driven by dissatisfaction with insufficient local government service delivery, such as limited access to water and power, labour disputes, and education. Subsection (2) of Section 152 requires municipalities to strive within their financial and administrative capacity to achieve these objectives. Despite these provisions, service delivery remains a challenge for many municipalities, and communities continue to suffer.

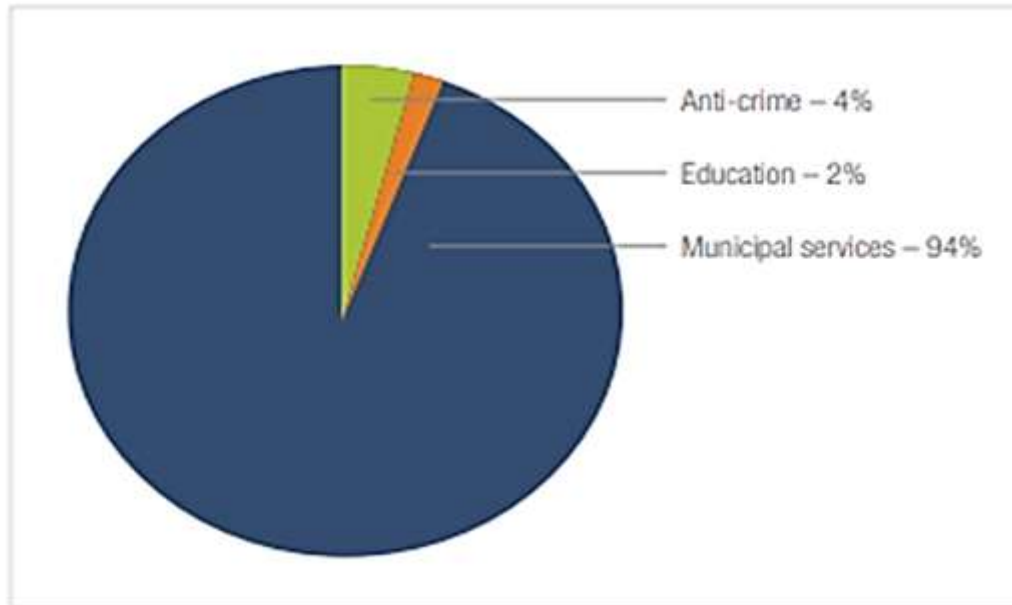


Figure 2.1: service delivery frustrations and dissatisfaction from 2013 to 2016
Source: Cilliers et al. (2016) as adopted from ISS Public Violence Monitor

Figure 2.1 presented by Cilliers and Aucoin (2016) illustrates the level of service delivery in local government. If there is sufficient allocation of services, good governance, and a well-defined relationship with the community members, there will be fewer protests. However, if the opposite is true, it will explain the status of service delivery in the local government (Cilliers et al. 2016).

4.5. Deprived Communities in Need of Services

The Institute for Security Studies Protest and Public Violence Monitor has been keeping track of service delivery protests across South Africa since 2013. According to their records, an average of 2.26 demonstrations take place every day in the country. In 2013 and 2014, there were roughly three protests per day. However, since then, there has been an increase in service delivery protests, with an average of 2.5 protests per day in 2019 and 900 between August 2020 and January 2021 (Guy Martin Defence Web, 2021). These protests and violent incidents highlight the deteriorating relationship between the government and the people, as observed back in 2007 by Christmas (2007). It is easy for people to demand involvement in procedures that affect their lives, but when those practices don't benefit them or meet their expectations, issues arise. According to Hough (2008), the link between service delivery protests, rising expectations, and RD has been frequently discussed. The failures of the government and the economy have led to growing tension between what people expect and the reality of, or their perception of, service delivery. In this context, disadvantaged groups feel deprived of socioeconomic equality, which means that the way services are distributed among them is considered unfair (Manzi 2007, Mogotsi, 2017). This problem is particularly pronounced in black-occupied dwellings, especially informal residences. Gurr's "Why Men Rebel" supports the "dissatisfaction-aggression" hypothesis, which explains the violence that often results from expressing frustration. The more intense and long-lasting the frustration, the more likely people are to become aggressive. Gurr also argues that the degree and scope of RD influence the potential for collective violence. He concludes that frustration-aggression is the primary source of the human capacity for violence (Burger, 2009). According to Connolly (2013), protests are not a surprise given the current socio-economic situation. People are frustrated with being promised a "new dawn" while they continue to face problems at the grassroots level, while wealthy communities receive superior services. Poverty and inequality are causing division in the country. Cilliers

et al. (2016) suggest that poverty, unemployment, and living conditions lead people to engage in violent actions, and protests are an easy way to express themselves. Vhumbunu (2021) has analyzed the 2021 nationwide protests in South Africa and identified several reasons behind them. Due to the COVID-19-induced national lockdown measures, citizens were frustrated by the worsening poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, and inequality. These issues, combined with the deep-rooted and acute socio-economic challenges faced by poor and marginalized citizens, particularly in townships, provided a breeding ground for social unrest. With the economy shrinking by 2.7 percent from the first-quarter 2020 level, and economic growth being incredibly weak, the economically excluded, helpless, and marginalized populations are a result of poverty, unemployment, and inequality. The ongoing protests that we are witnessing today may seem familiar to some, as historically, people's discontent has often escalated into socio-political uprisings. In 2009, Burger stated that if these concerns are left unaddressed for an extended period, they could eventually lead to a full-fledged revolt. Burger defined a rebellion as an "effort to fundamentally modify an organizational structure in a very short period." Hough (2008) also acknowledged that "the potential for this to expand into a larger insurgency exists, but the existence of certain underlying conditions favourable to both political violence and the building of revolutionary potential is obvious." The presence of trigger factors, such as rising food prices, and the demonstrative impact of violent protests and assaults, such as those against foreigners, have been shown to have a contagious effect across other areas or provinces.

5. Discussion and Recommendations

The occurrence of service delivery protests or community protests has been a challenge that is not well understood by many people, despite the ongoing discussions in the mainstream media. According to the literature, the most common issue leading to such protests is the lack or poor delivery of services in underserved areas, which can exacerbate deprivation and lead to unrest. It has been noted that a variety of factors contribute to the violent nature of these protests, such as police action, unemployment among youth, and political landscapes. The provision of services to deprived communities has been an ongoing challenge. For example, the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) policy was opposed by many due to its lack of extension to poor communities or insufficient policies, as was proposed by the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). The provision of services to poor people has been a challenge for the government, as noted by the DFID (2010). This has contributed to protests, particularly in places like Alexander and Soweto. Poor people rely on these services to enhance their lives and fulfil their basic human rights. Services such as education, healthcare, and livelihood support are essential for these people to be included in the labour market. Some of the reforms have been seen to benefit the elite and neglect the poor. The people at the grassroots level do not need a lot of policies written on paper to limit their participation and their ability to shape the policies that affect their lives. Rather, they need straightforward policies created together and implemented effectively. It is often the case that people are influenced by their relationship with the state. However, when a society is wounded, it may not accept help from the state. Therefore, networks that only involve policymakers and do not reach the people on the ground are not likely to be successful. Instead, it is important to facilitate linkages between existing groups and between those groups and the state. Strengthening networks that have a strong vertical reach (from policymakers to the grassroots) might be a good strategy for achieving improvements in social accountability (DFID, 2010). When providing services, it is important to balance the needs of the community with the processes involved. Programs should address social exclusion, inequality, and socioeconomic problems without causing harm to other groups. Human rights-based approaches to service delivery are equally significant. They can help people access institutions, resources, and services. If marginalized communities are to achieve their rights to water, healthcare, housing, and a living wage, responsive institutions and service delivery are essential. Additionally, more accommodating organizations can help people understand their rights and access the services they need (DFID, 2010).

6. Concluding Remarks

It has been observed that when people are not given access to services and are left out of decision-making processes, they tend to become frustrated and may protest. This phenomenon has been studied by many researchers, including Gurr and Alexander. Poor people tend to rebel when they are deprived of services and face socio-economic challenges. This can lead to revolts or even revolutionary actions. Despite frequent policy changes, people still feel unheard and unsatisfied with the government's efforts. This is mainly due to broken promises and unfulfilled commitments. The government needs to understand that people will protest when they feel neglected. Therefore, it is suggested that there needs to be a clear and strong relationship between the government, citizens, and other stakeholders. This will ensure accountability and responsiveness to the needs of the people at the grassroots level. Participatory democracy and political inclusion are also necessary for local government municipalities. The provision and organization of services often trigger protests. People want to feel like they have control over activities that affect their lives. Access to services, especially for disadvantaged areas, is crucial in reducing disparities and protests. Marginalized and disadvantaged groups are more likely to engage in protests. It is therefore essential for municipalities to be proactive in addressing the needs and expectations of citizens. To reduce protests, it is important to address the larger challenges in grassroots communities such as lack of basic services, unemployment, and poverty. The government must work towards meeting the needs and expectations of citizens. Until these needs are met, protests will continue to occur in municipalities.

7. Future Research

This paper contends that there is still a need for further research to assess the causes of the crisis of governance that pervades the municipal authorities to create communities that serve their needs. Scholarly research is still required to examine the extent to which service delivery protests have not been reduced or alleviated given the policy framework introduced in municipalities to address the challenges faced by people at the grassroots level.

8. Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest in relation to this paper, as well as the published research results, including the financial aspects of conducting the research, obtaining and using its results, as well as any nonfinancial personal relationships.

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