



Good governance policy dimensions as determinants of public trust in the post COVID-19 era in South Africa

Nqobile Sikhosana *

University of Johannesburg, School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy, South Africa

Abstract

In all democratic structures, public trust is a critical component of good governance, celebrated as a reliable predictor of social capital and enhancing public sector institutions' performance by improving teamwork, decision-making, and regulation quality. The COVID-19 pandemic led to diminishing levels of trust in South Africa, compromising local governments' mandate to foster good governance and efficiently render services. This paper explores the main drivers of public trust and how these can be adopted in the post-COVID-19 era to improve governance and service rendering in the local government context. Employing qualitative research methods, a literature analysis was conducted to address the research questions and investigate the application of good governance policy dimensions within South African local governments. The findings indicate that local governments in South Africa have encountered numerous challenges in retaining public trust in the post-COVID-19 era, as evidenced by a surge in community protests. The paper concludes that considering trust antecedents in municipal governance can help bridge the gap between citizens and local governments.

Keywords: Public trust; COVID-19; Public compliance; Local government; South Africa

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"...trust building activities can enable organizations to get out in front and stay ahead of problems."

Baruch Fischhoff

1. Introduction

Since the first case was recorded on December 31, 2019, in Wuhan, China, the SARS-CoV-2 affected millions of people throughout the world. The COVID-19 pandemic had unprecedented impacts on the political, social, and economic sectors across the globe. The Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME, 2021) points to the reality that the global pandemic of COVID-19 intensified attempts to comprehend this phenomenon. The main aim was to improve the capacity of states, good governance, relationships between governments and society, and significant involvement of citizens. This article advances the notion that public sector institutions have not been resistant to the social and economic pressure exerted by the pandemic and many countries especially in the global south have been grappling with the challenges of providing services to the citizens in an effective and efficient manner. As a consequence, governments around the world have been made aware of declining levels of trust among citizens in the institutions of the state in a variety of settings (DPME, 2021). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021) documents that despite an initial “*rally around the flag*” effect seen early in the pandemic, many institutions in developing countries observed increasing levels of distrust in public institutions’ capacity to handle the crisis and implement long-term coherent policies. In light of this, De Figueredo et al. (2020) believe that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by an increase in cynicism about long-term economic recovery in a number of low-income countries.

Evidence from empirical literature also suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic sparked widespread misinformation, undermining both scientific understanding and public policy approval (De Figueredo et al., 2020; OECD, 2021). It is worth pointing out that trust in public sector institutions to effectively respond to the daunting challenges presented by COVID-19 has diminished since the outbreak of the pandemic. The proper functioning and governance of states in the aftermath of a crisis is determined by the citizens’ trust in government institutions. This is further buttressed by Enria et al. (2021) who opines that previous epidemics around the world have demonstrated that public acceptability of any outbreak response measure is a critical component for its success. Citizens’ engagement with specific measures as well as their perceptions of the organisations that administer them, have been shaped in many developing nations by social, political, and economic frameworks, as well as historical dynamics. Dhillon and Kelly (2015) purport that public trust is not fixed; it can be earned or lost throughout the response and the aftermath of a pandemic. The outbreak of the COVID-19 has been used to determine the extent in which the South African spheres of government have managed to build public trust through numerous policy measures. In the South African public sector terrain, establishing public trust and buy-in from citizens has been outlined as a specific challenge that continues to menace institutions in the aftermath of the pandemic. This has been exacerbated by the fact that South Africa has endured years of political schisms, rising inequality and poverty, and a lack of reliable information have eroded the confidence of public institutions. In response to this, Chew et al. (2021) aver that governments need make “trust” a vital component of the economic revival process and good governance.

The notion advanced in this article is that whilst the value of trust in an efficient outbreak response is well acknowledged, the drivers that influence (mis)trust in the aftermath of an epidemic strategic responses in the South African local government context are less well studied and documented. The article suggests pathways through which the good governance policy dimensions in the local government sphere can be essential in establishing sustained public trust. More so, the author looks at one facet of the dynamics of public trust in the

South African local government's reaction after the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, the article responds to the following questions:

- To what extent did the outbreak of COVID-19 affect public trust and governance in South African public sector?
- How can the drivers of trust or good governance policy dimensions be entrenched within local government processes to establish trust in the aftermath of COVID-19 era in South Africa?

The significance of public trust as an antecedent of good governance and effective public policy decisions is explored in this article, drawing experiences from the South African local government context.

2. Literature review

This section delves into extant literature on connections that exist between the COVID-19 related impacts and public trust. In addition, the section also explores the implications of this kind of relationship on municipal governance.

2.1. Public trust and the outbreak of COVID-19

Over the past decades, a large body of literature on trust has produced several definitions. However, the accumulation of these definitions has contributed to confusion, making its meaning elusive, and ambiguous. As such, a commonly accepted definition of trust is still absent (Tanny and Al-Hossienie, 2019). According to OECD (2015: 156) trust in government can be defined as “the confidence of citizens and businesses in the actions of government to do what is right and perceived as fair” This reflects the citizens’ belief in the reliability of those tasked with the governments’ administrative duties to what is in their interests (Cairney and Wellstead, 2021). The insinuation here is that public trust reflects perceived government performance. It can be illustrated that policies, directives, and moral persuasion may be more effective if the public perceives the government to be largely on its side (Gustavsen et al., 2014; Lynn, 2013). In this case, the argument advanced here is that effective and efficient governmental management and responsive service delivery is a potential condition *sine-qua-non* for cultivating public trust which is imperative in establishing a good relationship between public officials and communities.

The OECD (2021) identifies the key drivers of public trust or good governance policy dimensions that influence citizens’ trust in public sector institutions and these include responsiveness, reliability, integrity, transparency, and fairness. These characteristics are linked to government responsibilities such as providing public services, safeguarding citizens, maintaining good governance, and making optimal use of resources. The relevance of these characteristics in determining trust is well illustrated in Table 1.

The empirical applicability of the concept of public trust has been assessed in eight OECD countries, with outcomes revealing that a combination of governmental competence and values are important predictors of trust among the general population (Murtin et al., 2018). According to Nzewi et al. (2019), public trust is largely based on communities' conviction in the authority and trustworthiness of government officials to take the necessary measures to meet that community's service delivery standards as outlined in the government's strategic plans. According to the OECD's trust paradigm (2021), the confidence of the public in government is important since it refers to the degree of trustworthiness of the relationship that citizens have with their

government. Extent literature has shown that affective and efficient accomplishment of government mandates to provide public services, protect citizens in times of crisis, use public resources efficiently, consult citizens and improvement of socio-economic well-being for all is imperative in enhancing trust. On the contrary, the ignorance of such mandates often leads to citizen discontent and disillusionment that negatively impacts public trust. Aidi (2020) avers that in the African context, it seems that governments with increased trust and engagement with community officials perform much better than governments with low levels of trust.

Table 1. Public trust components and policy dimensions

Trust Component	Government Mandate	Mandate Concern affecting trust	Policy Dimension
<i>Competence</i> The ability of governments to deliver to citizens the services they need, at the standard they expect	Provide public services	Access to public services, regardless of socio-economic status; Quality and timeliness of public services; Respect for public service provision, including responsiveness to citizens' feedback	Responsiveness
	Anticipate change, protect citizens	Anticipation and adequate assessment of evolving citizen's needs and challenges; Consistent and predictable behaviour; Effective management of social, economic and political uncertainty;	Reliability
<i>Values</i> The drivers and principles that inform and guide government action	Use power and public resources ethically	High standards of behaviour; Commitment against corruption; Accountability;	Integrity
	Inform, consult and listen to citizens	Ability to know and understand what government is doing; Engagement opportunities that lead to tangible results;	Openness
	Improve socio-economic conditions for all	Pursuit of socio-economic progress for society at large; Consistent treatment of citizens and businesses (vs. fear of capture).	Fairness

Source: OECD (2017)

Evidence from practice has shown that public trust is especially important during public health emergencies, and the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception to the rule that when epidemics pose major threats to the health of entire nations, mistrust can have serious implications (Bennett, 2020). More so, experience

with pandemics has shown that during and after infectious disease outbreaks, trust is crucial, as proven by research on SARS (2002–2003), swine flu (2009–2010), and Ebola (2014–2016). Since then, trust has been identified as a critical component of effective and efficient management of public institutions. Saechang et al. (2021) argue that public trust is imperative to consider in the discourse of good governance because it increases policy compliance and makes policy implementation easier. Limited trust in the government, on the other hand, results in lower compliance and compromises governance. If trust is not established properly, it might lead to a vicious cycle of non-compliance, hardship, and distrust. This presents serious concerns in a society where citizens have little trust in the government about how to increase the possibility of people complying with policy interventions in times of crisis, resulting in the successful containment of epidemics.

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, public trust has been crucial in governments' response to its devastating impacts, with countries with higher levels of social and government trust experiencing slower virus propagation and lower mortality rates (Weinberg, 2020). According to Balog-Way and McComas (2020), the 'infodemic' surrounding the virus contributed to what they term the 'pandemic fog' that has been punctuated by quickly developing knowledge and contradictory messages, presenting serious trust concerns for many countries. Even though national governments enacted a variety of social and economic 'lockdowns,' albeit at variable rates, early studies revealed that public acceptance and adherence varied (Connolly et al., 2020). It has been noted that several elements of the COVID-19 epidemic made creating trust particularly difficult due to uncertainty. What can be noted is that South Africa has not remained immune to diminishing levels of public trust during the pandemic and in its aftermath. As such, the level of public trust in the government sectors' ability to respond effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic is also critical (Gozgor, 2021).

Efforts by the governments to deal with the related effects of the pandemic succeed or fail based on popular belief by the citizens that their governments take the correct steps in their efforts (Aidi, 2020). In a study carried out by GeoPoll (2020), participants were asked if they firmly agreed or disagreed with the following statement in a survey of twelve African countries that have used partial lockdowns: "My government has done enough to stem the spread of coronavirus" The biggest percentages of respondents rejected the notion that their government was doing (32% in the DRC and 31% in Zambia). Rwanda came up on top (with 81 percent strongly agreeing), followed by Mozambique (with 59 percent strongly agreeing). In addition, vaccination hesitancy was attributed to the extent to which citizens trust their governments' actions.

3. Research methods

This paper used a method based on qualitative research to conduct a literature analysis in order to address the aforementioned questions and to investigate the application of trust antecedents in the South African local government context. Qualitative literature analysis is a type of literature review that focuses on the analysis and synthesis of qualitative research, and it involves identifying and evaluating relevant on a particular phenomenon (Adhabi and Anozie, 2017). At the crux of this review is the extraction and comparison of key themes, patterns, and findings from the literature. The main goal of this paper is to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on public trust and analyse the extent to which good governance determinants can be used to restore the diminishing levels of trust in a local government set-up. The process of conducting literature analysis in this study involved the following steps:

- Identifying relevant literature through searches of databases, journals and other sources that delve into effects of COVID-19 on public trust in a local government set-up,
- Evaluating literature for quality and relevance,
- Extracting and comparing key themes, patterns and findings from the literature, and
- Synthesis of literature into a coherent narrative or argument.

Search words included “public trust and COVID-19 in local government processes in South Africa” The publications were purposefully chosen to gain a thorough grasp of the trends in public trust. This method considers existing debates on diminishing levels of trust in South Africa since the outbreak of the pandemic. Publications relevant to the article's primary themes were collected from literature databases such as Emerald Insight Journals, Google Scholar, IBSS, and Scopus among many others. All the chosen material was screened using the title, abstract, and full text. To guarantee that the study delivers an accurate conclusion, the author performed appropriate synthesis of the existing literature from the relevant resources. The data gathered from various sources was analysed and thematically interpreted with the goal of addressing the research questions posed in this paper.

4. The effects of COVID-19 on public trust in South Africa

By June 2020, South Africa's lockdown efforts were considered to be in disarray resulting from the number of confirmed infections that continued to rise at an exponential rate, placing the country among the top ten most affected countries in the globe, and on average, eight public protest actions occurred every day (Naudé and Cameron, 2020). Evidence also points to the fact that a few months after the announcement of the lockdown, the “*feel-good bloom*” faded, and the country continued to struggle to pull together. One cause has been identified as the government's mishandling of the lockdowns, while another is the country's economic meltdown. To argue in favour of this point, Myburgh (2020) claims that the government mismanaged a variety of challenges. A lack of action to put an end to rampant corruption in the allocation of COVID-19 relief funding is one among them. Similarly, Oliver (2020) explains that approximately 600 cases of misconduct were investigated in 2020 utilising the COVID-19 relief award. Noteworthy, these challenges have seen the level of public trust in government diminish as citizens across the country expressed their disillusionment across many sectors.

Since the dawn of a new democratic era in 1994, public institutions have experienced diminishing levels of public trust (Nzewin et al., 2019; Msenge and Nzewi, 2021), owing in large part to a disdain for core components of meaningful involvement such as interactional and informational justice among others. In this case, distrust in public institutions did not start with the outbreak of the pandemic as incidents of corruption, mismanagement of public funds, irregular expenditure and unresponsive service delivery have been reported since 1994. The South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB), a nationally representative public opinion survey done by the Institute of Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), (2019) on a regular basis, examined respondents' confidence in the state and each other to provide some insight. According to the findings of the IJR (2019), South Africans had a low degree of trust in the government prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

From Figure 1, it is clear that the three spheres of government, i.e. national (42%), provincial government (36%), and local government (34%) have been battling to gain the much-needed trust of the public. The same can be said about other public sector institutions.

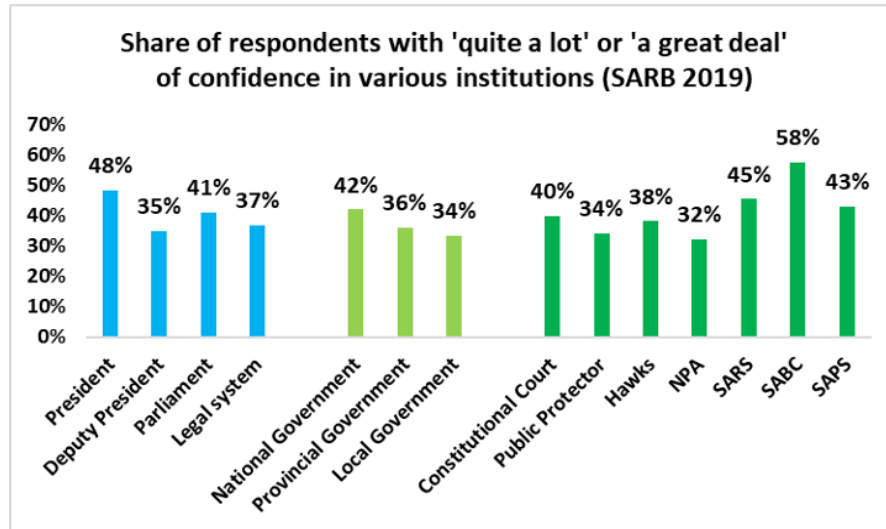


Figure 1. Level of trust in government institutions

It can be noted that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by the “infodemic”, which according to the WHO, can lead to diminishing levels of public trust in the government and health institutions for the reason that it can impair public health responses. Like in many countries, South African citizens remained unsure about which sources of information to believe, leaving them exposed to misinformation related to COVID-19 and government responses to mitigate its spread. According to the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (2020), South African citizens trusted scientific sources such as the WHO and doctors more than their own government. The findings by The Conversation (2021) explored the reality that the majority of people remained critical of the government's response to the outbreak. According to the latest research, 61 % of respondents indicated they "very" or "somewhat" disagreed with the government's handling of the pandemic, while only 21.1 % said they "strongly approved" (The Conversation, 2021). This had an impact on the effectiveness of government’s responses ranging from lockdown restrictions to vaccination-related messages.

The diminishing level of trust in the government could be linked to the country's vaccination deployment which drew a lot of criticism across the South African sectors. Evidence points to the fact that the deployment strategy was beset by delays, and the administration was heavily chastised for failing to achieve its deadlines. According to a survey by Dzinamarira et al. (2021), 52% of South Africans were not willing to take the COVID-19 vaccines, owing in large part to religion, fear of needles, and unconsented government tracking. The initial pause in South Africa's distribution of the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccines may have played a role in eroding public trust in COVID-19 vaccinations, as the perception was created that vaccinations may not be successful after all, not just for 501Y.V2, but for all COVID-19 vaccines (Dzinamarira et al., 2021). The initial pause in South Africa's distribution of the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccines may have played a role in eroding public trust

in COVID-19 vaccinations, as the perception was created that vaccinations may not be successful after all, not just for 501Y.V2, but for all COVID-19 vaccines (Dzinamarira et al., 2021). As such, it can be argued that the widespread criticism of the government's handling of the epidemic, as well as the government's overall lack of trust, should serve as a reminder to government communicators that generating effective pro-vaccine messages is insufficient. In this article, the author advances the notion that local governments have a key role to play in building public trust by engaging local communities in all the efforts meant to curtail the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The rising socio-economic distress is to blame for this shockingly low level of trust in local municipalities. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the South African economy was in a slump. When utilizing the extended definition that includes jobless persons who have given up looking for work, the pandemic's economic havoc has increased the unemployment rate to 44.4% (StatSA, 2021). South Africa's lack of trust in local governments shows evidence of the decline of democratic values. Notwithstanding the fact that the promise of democratization has not yet begun to bring considerable material improvements to the vast majority of the population, poverty, unemployment, inequalities, and violence have remained important challenges.

The effects of COVID-19 on the levels of trust in local government administrators have also been documented. The introduction of lockdowns contributed to a communication breakdown between local government administrators and the most rural communities. In this case, the meaningful participation of citizens was stifled. For instance, a study conducted by Taylor et al. (2020) in Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality shows that communities were generally unaware of the municipality's development ambitions and did not participate fully in local government activities. What can be deduced here is that lack of accurate information and involvement in municipal processes have proven to be one of the catalysts for citizen discontentment and diminishing levels of trust in local governments.

The Auditor General Report for 2021-2022 financial management also painted a gloomy picture in terms of local municipalities' handling of finances. According to the report, local government has been characterized by dysfunctional municipalities, financial mismanagement, council and administrative instability, and deteriorating infrastructure (Auditor General Report, 2021-2022). What can be noted is that at the height of COVID-19, financial embezzlement by local governments was reported and this further damaged the relations between local government officials and the citizens. More so, challenges relating to slow delivery of services by municipalities during lockdown have been documented in the literature. In a municipal survey conducted by the DPME (2020), results showed that municipalities were facing challenges in providing water, sanitation, and energy to their residents.

On June 20-21, 2020, various local media outlets recorded water service problems, either imminent or existing. For instance, the Mbombela Local Municipality lost 25.2% of its water due to unlawful water connections and leaks that were not addressed in a timely manner, procurement processes that were not adhered to, and inflated contract amounts (DPME, 2020). In response to these challenges, the Mbombela municipality's spokeswoman stated that the COVID-19 restrictions and the need for increased water supply had put additional strain on the infrastructure. Emalahleni Local Municipality's water distribution losses reached 47%, leaving no cash available to upgrade water treatment plants. Another example was also reported in some parts of Makhanda in the Eastern Cape Province where residents experienced water supply interruptions after the town's main water treatment works failed on 20 May 2020, (DPME, 2020). What is important to note about all these disturbances is that communities have been up in arms with the local

government administration due to unresponsive service delivery. The next section delves into the relationship between distrust and the outbreak of community protests at local government level.

5. Public mistrust as a catalyst for community protests

The aftermath of COVID-19 related lockdowns witnessed heightened community protests across South African municipalities. Nzewi et al. (2019) argue that that community-based service delivery demonstrations in South Africa can be understood as reactions by communities to egregious local government decision-making rather than the results of those decisions. In line with this, the Municipal IQ documents a surge in community protests in the post COVID-19 era. In the literature, reasons for service delivery protests range from unfulfilled government promises to a lack of basic services, particularly in underserved areas with deprivation and inequality. Nevertheless, data from research on service delivery demonstrations in the local government domain points to an often mentioned but inadequately explained reason which is communities' lack of trust in the decision-making processes of their local administrators (Nzewi et al., 2019) that are not aligned with their expectations.

A surge in community protests in the post COVID-19 era has been attributed to the relaxation of lockdown and other restrictions that limited movement and community meetings. Municipal IQ (2023); Mamokhere and Meyer (2023) provide an argument that the current wave of community protests illustrates the growing citizen discontentment with service delivery trajectory taken by their local governments. A critical analysis by Mubangizi (2020), reflects that fundamental scepticism in local governments' decisions underlines citizens' socio-economic concerns. What can be deduced here is communities have developed a sense that local governments' role as mediators between society and state is constantly fading and this has fuelled community protests. More so, a deviation from ethical and servant leadership has also heightened citizen mistrust as municipal officials have been arraigned before courts for financial misconduct and management. Mothabi and Vyas-Doorgapersad (2022) explore numerous maladministration practices ranging from corruption, fraud, irregular expenditure and embezzlement of funds that continue to stifle responsive service rendering in the local government set up. Whilst public trust has been documented in literature as a capital that develops slowly over time, in some instances it may be founded or broken on actions that appear to be volatile.

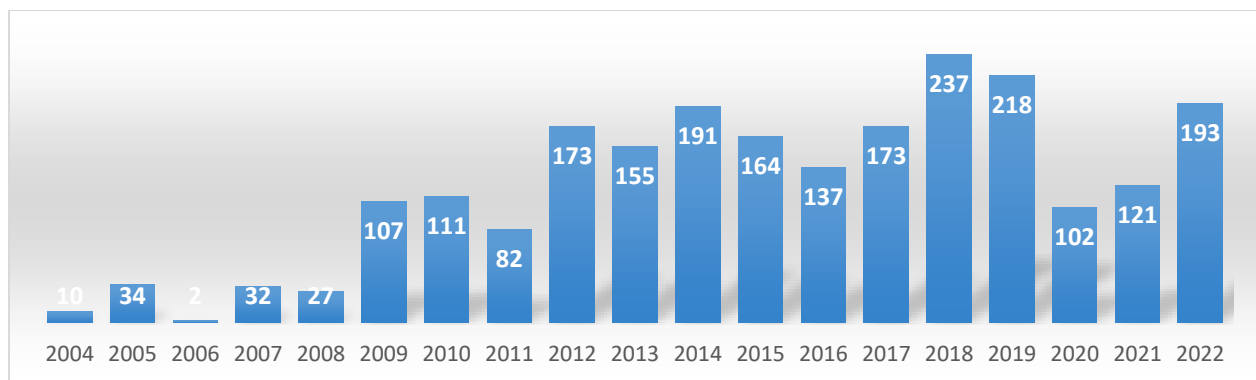


Figure 2. Major service delivery protests, by year 2004 –2022 (Source: Municipal IQ, 2023)

In this regard, news and allegations of misappropriation of COVID-19 funds, at the height of unresponsive service rendering have had unprecedented impacts on the levels of public trust and community protests. Figure 2 explores major service delivery protest trends between the years 2004 and 2022.

According to the Municipal IQ (2023), even though community protest statistics in the year 2022 were much higher than the previous two years, they did not reach the record protest levels of 2018 and 2019. What explains this scenario is that the numerous lockdowns related to COVID-19 suppressed protest action in the two years. As a result, public dissatisfaction in 2022 surged in the winter of June and then gradually declined until the end of the year. Gauteng, with 27% of all demonstrations in the country, will continue to be the most common location of demonstrations against service delivery in 2022, as it has been in the past. It is closely followed by KZN (22% of protests) and the Eastern Cape (16% of protests) (Municipal IQ, 2023). The argument presented in this article is that the current gloomy picture emanates from the reality that the public has somehow felt betrayed by the municipal officials and have withdrawn their faith and trust in all municipal stakeholders.

As postulated by Nzewi et al. (2019), citizens' mistrust has been the underlying factor that exacerbates demonstrations owing to the disregard of informational justice, interactional justice and procedural justice. When citizens are not involved in the municipal processes and are not informed about the day-to-day dealings of the municipal government, they become sceptical. What can be noted is that issues such as corruption and maladministration of municipalities have become a spark to ignite demonstrations meant to show citizens' disillusionment over the actions or inactions of local governments. It is therefore imperative to explore the extent to which the drivers of good governance can be applied in municipal governance to retain public trust.

6. The application of drivers of public trust in local government

At local government level, the actions or inactions of public administrators in service rendering and response in the aftermath of COVID-19 play a significant role in strengthening or weakening public trust. The conceptual framework below shows that effective and efficient local government administration is a key imperative in championing effective and seamless efforts that are meant to retain community trust at the level of local government. The interface between the policy dynamics at the local government level, public trust and how meaningful citizen participation tenets play a mediating role in strengthening or weakening the relationship between communities and public administrators.

According to the OECD (2020), policy dimensions such as transparency, integrity, reliability, responsiveness, and fairness are vital for organisational performance. In this regard, this article advances the notion that the consideration of these dimensions, coupled with meaningful participation by communities can help local governments establish public trust in their efforts to retain trust and quell the upsurge of community protests. Farwell et al. (2019), define transparency as the openness and presentation of all facts and information relevant to a specific problem and is thought to be the remedy to many of the representative democracy concerns through strengthening public confidence in municipal authorities. Evidence points to the reality that governments go to great lengths to ensure that the administrative processes are transparent in order to retain communities' trust. This viewpoint is founded on the idea that public openness assists citizens in better comprehending the motivations behind government choices (Mansoor et al., 2020). In the South African context, financial mismanagement concerns and the flouting public procurement processes during

COVID-19 pandemic raised a lot of questions (Munzhedzi, 2021). More so, corruption allegations that relate to the acquisition of protective equipment and the establishment of shelters for the homeless were made. This is due to the manipulation of legislative prescripts, which allow for such procurement without public notice, especially in emergency cases like the COVID-19 epidemic (Munzhedzi, 2021). Lack of transparency in local government may have the domino effect in terms of diminishing public trust. In this regard, the idea advanced in this article is that ensuring transparency in municipal administrative processes and COVID-19 related mitigation efforts is key in establishing citizens' belief that municipalities serve their interests.

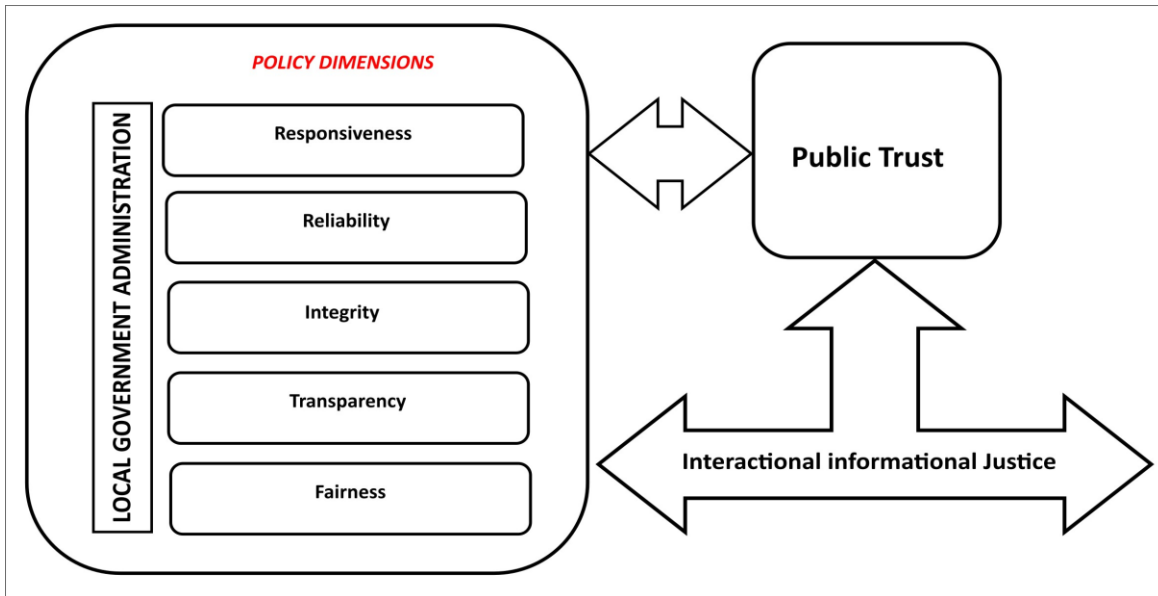


Figure 3. Interaction between policy dimensions, participation and public trust

Policy reactivity, according to Shvetsova et al. (2020), is also a crucial driver of the government's approach to the epidemic scenario. Using the COVID-19 experience as a measuring stick, Ojiagu et al. (2020) investigated the relationship between accountability and transparency in nation-building and discovered that both have a massive effect on the government's response in unpredictable circumstances while making decisions in the public interest. Governments throughout the globe had responded differently to COVID-19 in terms of national interventions and timely response to the pandemic crisis (Hale et al., 2020), culminating in public and policymaker disagreement. Henderson et al. (2020) investigated the field of medical and health sciences and concluded that the government's response to COVID-19 had a major impact on the public's trust in government programs. Similarly, Gates (2020) stated that in order to gain public trust, governments must respond to a variety of concerns promptly and properly, particularly in the context of citizens' health. As a result, it is critical for local governments in South Africa to respond quickly in order to alleviate public tension, worry, and psychological as well as behavioural difficulties, and to gain their trust for long-term sustainability (Germani et al., 2020). In this case, public trust becomes a prerequisite for the whole system's smooth operation.

Integrity has become one of cornerstones of local government administration. Integrity relates to persistent congruence of and commitment to common standards of ethics, norms, and practices for protecting and prioritising the public interest in the public sector (OECD, 2017). This is a vital institutional value and a key

factor in establishing public trust. It is important to note that the manner in which municipal governments behave and the degree to which they can be trusted to protect the public interest have a big impact on how much citizens trust them. Notwithstanding the rapidity of the reaction, integrity must be taken into consideration while mobilising resources at local government level in order to build trust and ensure that such resources are distributed to the public interest.

Fairness is also perceived as one of the drivers of public trust in the local government context. The OECD (2017) documents that citizens' perceptions of fairness, both in the process and in the outcomes, are a crucial component of trust. Evidence has demonstrated that citizens must have the sense that they have a true voice, that they are treated with respect, and that they are given the required explanations in all the efforts to mitigate the effects of COVID-19. In this case, what can be noted is that positive fairness views contribute to increased acceptance of agency choices, better regulatory compliance, and more cooperative behaviour when dealing with local government personnel. Fairness perceptions can influence how citizens engage with government institutions in almost any situation; as a result, they are a key driver of trust in general. In the sphere of regulation, such interactions take place primarily in two contexts: when governments seek citizen feedback on draft regulations and when citizens experience enforcement actions, hearings, and appeals procedures as regulations are implemented.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

In South Africa, the onset of COVID-19 coincided with a decline in public faith in local government administration. Literature evidence suggests that local officials violated residents' wishes and preferences by engaging in corruption activities involving COVID-19 prevention and mitigation money. According to the Afrobarometer findings, local governments are the least trusted sector of government, which has been compounded by local governments' actions and inactions in response to the COVID-19 outbreak and the mitigation. Findings also show that the reaction of the local government sphere to the pandemic was hindered by a variety of formidable problems such as corruption and lack of transparency. The failure to deal with such problems has had a bearing on the levels of public trust as shown by the ruling party's declining electoral support in the 2021 municipal government elections. More so, citizen disgruntlement has also heightened service delivery protests that increased in the year 2022. This article proposes that a consideration of the citizen participation and the main drivers of public trust such as transparency, integrity, fairness, reliability and responsiveness by local government administrations in all the efforts towards COVID-19 mitigation mechanisms can help bridge the gap between citizens and local governments. The article recommends that local administrations must interact with citizens and fulfil their requirements. In the South African local government domain, public involvement has emerged as a critical notion in the formation of a participatory democratic and progressive state. Community self-determination can only occur when citizens are provided with the opportunities and resources to actively participate in local government decision-making affairs. More so, democratising participatory spaces can also be crucial for increased collaborative production. This has the potential to improve the public's trust and confidence in municipal governments by requiring community representatives to take a more meaningful role in guaranteeing accountability.

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