



THE IJR LENS ON AFRICA

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WHAT SOUTH AFRICANS REALLY THINK OF THEIR MUNICIPALITIES: INSIDE THE SIVIO INSTITUTE SURVEY *

As South Africa heads into its first local government elections since the African National Congress lost its parliamentary majority in May 2024, the message from citizens is unmistakable. Local government is failing and patience is thinning.

A new survey by the Sivio Institute, the 2025 Citizens' Perceptions and Expectations Survey, provides one of the clearest assessments yet of how South Africans view their municipalities. The report is particularly important because it focuses on local government, the sphere closest to citizens' daily lives. It is at this level that people experience the state most directly through the tap, the refuse truck, the pothole, the streetlight and the local clinic.

Yet local government often receives sustained political attention only during election season.

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The survey's findings are stark. Seventy percent of respondents rated their municipality's performance as low. Only 2 percent rated it as high. Dissatisfaction cuts across geography. Urban residents at 67 percent, rural residents at 73 percent and peri-urban residents at 74 percent all express deep frustration.



This is not an isolated sentiment. It is systemic disillusionment.

In metros like Johannesburg, recurring water outages, crumbling infrastructure and erratic service delivery have become routine. The water crisis in the city is not an anomaly. It is emblematic of a broader municipal malaise.

When municipalities were scored across 13 service delivery areas including water, sanitation, refuse collection, road maintenance, housing, employment creation and crime reduction, every single category scored below 3 out of 5. Employment creation and crime reduction were among the lowest rated functions. Even clean water and sanitation, a core constitutional responsibility, failed to inspire confidence.

The widening gap between political leadership and lived experience was captured during Johannesburg's water crisis when Panyaza Lesufi remarked that he bathes at a hotel when water is unavailable at home. While perhaps intended as a candid admission of inconvenience, the comment instead symbolised a deeper disconnect. When ordinary residents face dry taps, they queue for water tankers, miss work or go without. Political leaders often have alternatives. The inequality of coping mechanisms reinforces the perception that those in power are insulated from the consequences of failure.

The survey shows that citizens are not confused about their priorities. Nationally, the top three areas they want municipalities to focus on are decent jobs at 57 percent, clean water and sanitation at 44 percent and reducing crime at 38 percent. These concerns are consistent across age, gender and geography. They are practical demands rooted in lived experience.

Significantly, the Sivio survey lands at a moment of continental reflection. The African Union has declared 2026 as the year of "Assuring Sustainable Water Availability and Safe Sanitation Systems to Achieve the Goals of Agenda 2063." The theme recognises that water and sanitation are foundational to dignity, economic development and social stability across Africa. Yet the Sivio findings suggest that, at least in South Africa, these basic guarantees remain fragile at the municipal level. The continental ambition stands in sharp contrast to the lived municipal reality of dry taps and unreliable sanitation.

Afrobarometer data on sanitation and access to basic services further sharpens this concern. While formal infrastructure coverage in South Africa is comparatively higher than in many African countries, access remains uneven and reliability is a persistent problem.

In many communities, particularly informal settlements and rural areas, households rely on outside compound toilets and inconsistent water supply. The gap between official infrastructure statistics and everyday functionality helps explain why water and sanitation remain among citizens' top priorities.

In his 2026 State of the Nation Address, President Cyril Ramaphosa acknowledged the deep structural problems facing local government including infrastructure decay, governance instability, financial mismanagement and corruption. He emphasised professionalisation, stronger oversight and consequence management. The rhetoric aligns with the public mood.

WHEN ASKED WHAT HINDERS EFFECTIVE MUNICIPAL PERFORMANCE, 69 PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS CITED CORRUPTION.

But the survey reveals that trust remains fragile. When asked what hinders effective municipal performance, 69 percent of respondents cited corruption. Incompetence, nepotism and weak oversight followed behind. For many South Africans, the problem is not simply technical capacity. It is integrity and accountability.

This concern is sharpened by troubling evidence about the educational profile of some councillors. Reports have highlighted that a significant number of elected councillors struggle with basic literacy and comprehension. Local representatives are expected to scrutinise complex budgets, interrogate infrastructure plans and hold municipal officials accountable.

When those tasked with oversight lack the educational grounding to engage policy documents and financial reports, governance weakens.

The service delivery failures reflected in the Sivio survey do not occur in a vacuum. They are linked to the quality of political representation.

At the same time, audit outcomes have complicated the public conversation. Some metros, including Cape Town, have received clean audits from the Auditor-General of South Africa. A clean audit is important. It signals credible financial reporting and compliance with accounting standards. But a clean audit does not automatically mean residents experience good service delivery.

In several townships and informal settlements across Cape Town, residents continue to raise concerns about sanitation, housing backlogs, infrastructure inequality and safety. A clean audit measures financial governance. It does not measure whether services are delivered equitably across wards or whether infrastructure works consistently in poorer communities. Citizens judge municipalities not by audit certificates but by whether water flows, roads are repaired and refuse is collected.

This distinction is critical in an election year.

The Sivio Institute survey reads less like a technical policy document and more like a warning signal. It speaks directly to the everyday politics that shape how people live and to a growing impatience with rhetoric unaccompanied by results.

In many ways, the findings echo a sobering argument made by Justice Malala (a prominent South African journalist, political commentator), in his book We Have Now Begun Our Descent. Malala warned that as the state weakens, citizens would increasingly resort to private solutions, arranging their own security, electricity and water.

Every household, he argued, would begin to resemble a private local government, compensating for the failures of the public one. With such failures by municipalities and citizens now arranging for themselves, is South Africa turning into a Hobbesian jungle, where survival depends on personal resources rather than collective governance?

That reality is already visible. In wealthier suburbs, residents install boreholes, solar panels and private security systems. In poorer communities, people rely on informal coping mechanisms, water tankers and fragile community networks. The danger is not merely uneven service delivery. It is the gradual normalisation of a fractured social contract.

The gap between these private solutions and public service delivery underscores how far the promise of 'a better life for all,' made by Nelson Mandela in 1994, remains from being realized.

Local government is the frontline of state legitimacy. If it falters, trust erodes first at the level of daily survival. The collapse of the ANC's national majority in 2024 signalled a political shift. The upcoming local elections will test whether that shift can produce functional and accountable governance or whether fragmentation will deepen instability.

South Africans understand the difference between compliance and competence, between speeches and service delivery. They want clean audits, yes, but they also want clean water. And if the state cannot provide it, they may continue building alternatives, one household at a time, while the promise of a "better life for all" hangs in the balance.

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