

Bridging the Gap: How can Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Align Development Tools in South African Municipalities?

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ABSTRACT

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is typically challenging, and inadequate implementation leads to inefficiencies. These challenges are exacerbated by cognitive dissonance in leadership, as decision-makers may ignore M&E outcomes that contradict stated objectives, resulting in resource misallocation and unmet community needs. The study aim is to highlight the root cause of the inefficiencies. This paper employs a methodology that involves a desktop review of audit findings, case study literature, and SA policy documents from 2019 to 2025. The results reveal that inefficiencies in M&E systems in SA municipalities can be attributed to various factors, including leadership challenges, especially cognitive dissonance in leadership that stems from the country's historical context. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced understanding of the context and a commitment to capacity building and institutional strengthening. The study recommends integration of a robust M&E framework that would generate credible review reports at the conclusion of each five-year cycle.

Keywords: Local Economic Development (LED), Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E), Framework, Municipalities, Leadership, Cognitive Dissonance.

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of monitoring and evaluation can be traced from the public policy frameworks, prompted by an attempt to respond to inefficiencies inherited in bureaucratic systems. The practice of M&E has become a central point worldwide in enhancing quality and accountability (Ospina et al., 2021). Amin et al. (2023) further stated that monitoring and evaluation serve as a critical component in the management and oversight of projects within various sectors globally. Masuku and Jili (2010) posit that all spheres of government are under continual stress to improve the performance and quality of service delivery. The standing challenge is in the poor performance of municipalities, in which South Africa (SA) has become a focal point. These challenges are often articulated in despair and often demonstrated by residents, the media, and confirmed by the Auditor General's report, where we find that several municipalities receive unqualified audits. Tengan et al. (2021) explain that organisations depend on monitoring and evaluation to assess the performance of tabled projects and their impact. The assessed impact from monitoring and evaluation ensures a project is on track and points out the various interventions where needed. Projects have a life cycle. At the end of the cycle, monitoring and evaluation ensure that, along the stages of the cycle, the success can be tracked, with adaptability where necessary to ensure the acceptability of the project.

Policy monitoring and evaluation as an activity of public administration finds its basis in the theory of change (McConnell, 2019). Adanlawo and Chaka (2024) explain the Theory of Change as a critical tool that provides structures and methods to conceptualise pathways through which change occurs. It serves as a map that details connections between objectives, priorities, inputs, and outcomes. Further, the Theory of Change assists in identifying complexities along the policy cycle through monitoring and evaluation, where there are minimal unpredictable outcomes. Thus, monitoring and evaluation serve as a systematic assessment of the policy process as well as the measurement of the policy impact. Ding and Li, (2021) viewed monitoring and evaluation as a performance tracking process against set targets and the use of collected data to correct deviations from set targets in a timely manner. Fundamentally, monitoring acts as a continuous sense-making process that allows project managers to adopt and improve initiatives as they unfold. This sense-making requires accountable, agile, and leadership that is driven by the developmental agenda. Xaba et al. (2025) posit that the process of M&E ensures real-time insights that may highlight potential divergence from reaching the set developmental targets. Strong leadership that supports M&E allows for informed adjustments, supported by evidence, where needed. Weiss and Thurbon (2021) support that the role of leadership is important for any state, especially, a developmental state.

Problem Context and Objectives

Despite progressive policy frameworks such as IDPs, Strategic planning, and LED frameworks, SA municipalities are faced with numerous challenges in achieving their development goals due to weak M&E systems and cognitive dissonance in leadership. Unqualified audit reports indicate that R2.1 billion is wasted on misaligned projects, which is a signal of misaligned planning and implementation (Matarirano et al., 2023). The historical history of the country has resulted in leadership dissonance, and the M&E findings contradict political promises. The systemic consequences highlighted in service delivery protests have eroded public trust, where 68% of municipalities have received unqualified audits (Msenge & Nzewi, 2021). The impact of LED bypasses M&E indicators, which signals a program that is challenged.

To draw attention to the underlying causes of M&E inefficiencies, this study used a qualitative research methodology based mostly on secondary sources, with a particular reference to a conceptual approach. The study examined a series of currently available pertinent IDP, LED, M&E, and service delivery documents by using audit findings, case study literature, and SA policy documents between 2019 and 2025.

Three objectives are set to achieve the study aim:

- To analyse institutional barriers on M&E in SA municipal settings
- Examine how cognitive dissonance manifests in leadership.
- Identify the cost of inefficiencies in M&E on public trust.

Conceptualisation and Contextualisation of IDP, LED, and Strategic Planning

Maharaj (2020) narrated that the strides in South Africa to deal with challenges of apartheid, such as Reconstruction and Development Programs (RDP), did not cover all aspects of social and spatial inequalities. Thus, the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) was established in 1996 as a coordinating tool to facilitate reintegration and development through provincial, district, and municipal government agencies. The White Paper on local government identified IDP as an important instrument and endorsed it (Simelane & Nohumba, 2024).

The Integrated Development Plan (IDP) in South Africa originated as a response to the country's apartheid past, which left a legacy of poorly planned cities and towns (Department of Cooperative Governance, 2022). With racially divided cities, towns, residential areas, inadequate service for the poor, and sprawling informal settlements. The IDP was introduced as a service delivery and development tool (Maphela & Adanlawo, 2025). The implementation of IDP is supported by various pieces of legislation in South Africa. The Government Gazette (2022) Report 21776 explains that the IDP framework is designed as a template to identify plans and planning requirements. These plans are binding in terms of National and Provincial legislation on the district and local municipalities. Principles, procedures, and matters specific to the development agenda of the district and local municipalities are specified in the IDP. Thus, the key purpose of IDP is to align development priorities, through addressing and identifying community needs of local communities, with the aim of unleashing economic, social, and environmental development.

Gibbens and Schoeman (2020) posit that there is a need to move away from micro-level development and management towards a micro-level people-centred development approach. Like many countries in developing nations, South Africa decentralized its service delivery mandate to the lowest spheres of government. This meant that the responsibility of promoting and rendering local socio-economic development and community participation facilitation is done at a local municipality. Thus, the IDP shifts the local government from a mere act of governing to actual governance. Through the IDP, the government transfers power and resources to local

government, where decision-making can be expedited and allocation of resources to create opportunities for citizen participation. This participation of communities is mostly articulated in the Local Economic Development strategy of a local municipality. Kaywood (2021) identified LED and IDP as power twins, as they were both introduced to complement the orientation of South African municipalities, as well as respond to the changing expectations of communities.

Local Economic Development

Local Economic Development (LED) is a process where local government, businesses, and communities collaborate to improve economic growth, job creation, and the quality of life (Khambulem, 2021; Chaka & Adanlawo, 2024). LED is efficient if aligned with municipal priorities and Strategic planning, where goals are set. All these endeavours to be efficient rely on M&E to track progress and ensure accountability to fulfil the mandate as per the Constitution, Section 152-53. It is imperative for LED to align with IDP to ensure resource allocation to support economic priorities. This alignment ensures that community needs are aligned through participatory planning. Strategic Planning in LED ensures that vision and goals are in line with the growth requirements of a local area. Without a deliberate SWOT analysis, LED cannot yield the desired results to improve the identified local area. M&E in LED ensures that regular progress is ensured, where necessary, followed by adaptable strategies. Thus, as much as it is an important tool, it cannot achieve the stated goals if departments within municipalities are working in isolation.

Strategic Planning

Strategic planning is an essential component of the IDP. Osah and Pade-Khene (2020) posit that through strategic planning, municipalities align resources with priorities, ensuring that efficient use of budget is achieved while rendering services and opportunities to the evolving demand of communities and other stakeholders in a given local area. In navigating the rapidly changing socio-economic landscape, the strategic planning process serves as a vital tool for enhancing service delivery and key aspects of community needs (South African Government, 2025). The key aspects of strategic planning are, firstly, to define the vision and the mission, drawing from the IDP, to establish clear goals. Thereafter, a SWOT analysis and priority setting are based on the assessment.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are an integral part of management and development of initiatives, providing crucial insights into the effectiveness of tools such as IDP and Strategic Planning, shedding the impact of such initiatives. Maseko (2023) defined M&E as a systematic approach that allows municipalities to understand complex dynamics within set priorities and projects. It assesses these priorities against strategies and how they are implemented, and makes informed decisions based on evidence. M&E is supposed to affect the theory of change based on gaps identified for the priorities and objectives to be met. An efficient M&E is pivotal for the development of tools to bring gains as stated in policy and the National Development Plan. This study asserts that the M&E should be part and parcel of IDP, Strategic Planning, and LED for success to be achieved. Figure Two below depicts a situation where the development tools can be viewed from the challenges of SA, where the desire for efficiency is a challenge, and its impact.

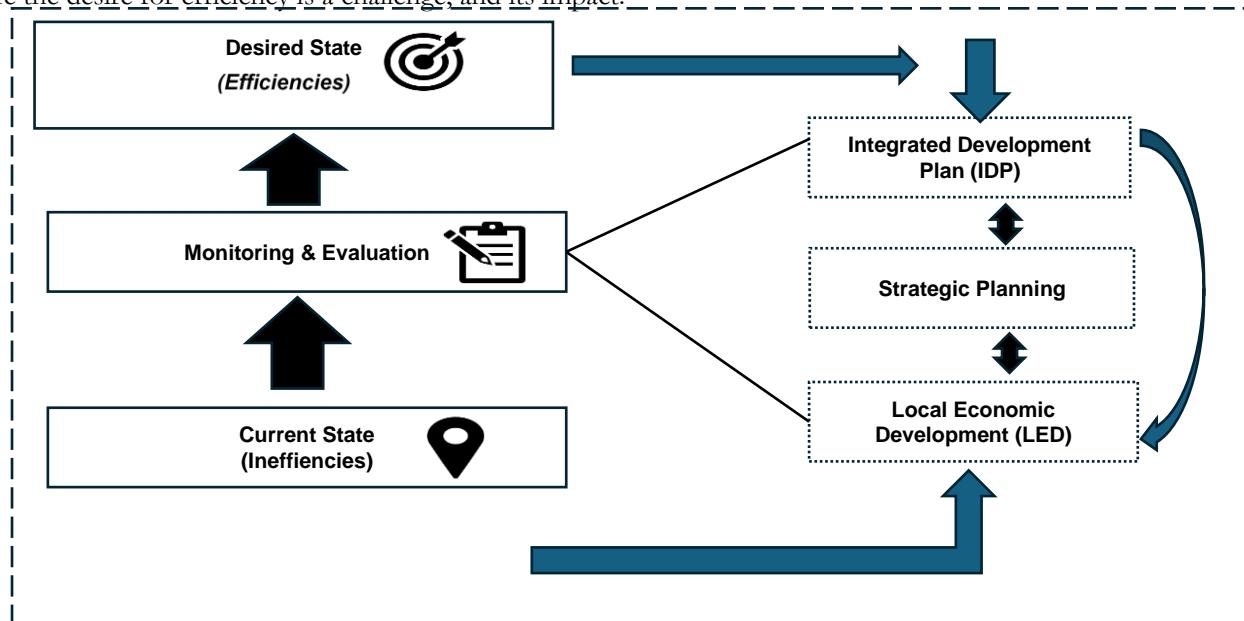


Figure 1. SA Municipal Development: Tools and M&E
Own Adaptation

Effective development in communities starts with three tools, namely, IDP, Strategic Planning, and LED, as depicted in the left part of the diagram. However, without the right feedback, these plans risk becoming disconnected from reality. Thus, M&E on the right-hand side of the diagram assists in keeping the projects from these tools on track. When it fails (inefficiency arrow, resources are wasted, and priorities are not met. Efficacy in LED is enabled by an efficient M&E process, which enables development in communities. On the other hand, without an efficient M&E, we may find municipalities continuing outdated infrastructure projects. In the SA situation, mired with inefficiencies, leadership has to be agile. Acknowledgment is needed to revise the findings of M&E, instead of drafting new policies. Denial of the root cause of these inefficiencies and pointing fingers, without getting to the root of the problem, becomes fruitless. However, in SA, since 1994, the state of liveable community spaces has been deteriorating, whilst each and every term of office, new ministers are appointed with promising manifestos before taking office. IN the SA municipal environment, leadership faces cognitive dissonance when the left-hand side of the tool in the diagram is not yielding the results, because of inefficient M&E.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Root

The administrative approach to state building in Africa capitalise on the essential elements, where the relationship between state and society becomes an integral part of nation-building (Chaka & Adanlawo, 2023). Most states in Africa, including South Africa, are a product of negotiations between the colonial administration and the African elite, where the influence of the societies they are meant to lead is minimal. It may be asked that in a fast-paced global world, where a country is transitioning from a colonial system to a post-colonial one, is there time to reflect on the kind of leadership fit for the developmental, ongoing course? Moreover, relaxing or abolishing the colonial grip on colonized societies seems to promise prospects or unrealistic optimism. In South Africa, it has been the case that there were more prospects than realistic goals. In this case, realistic goals also hinge primarily on inclusive processes of administration.

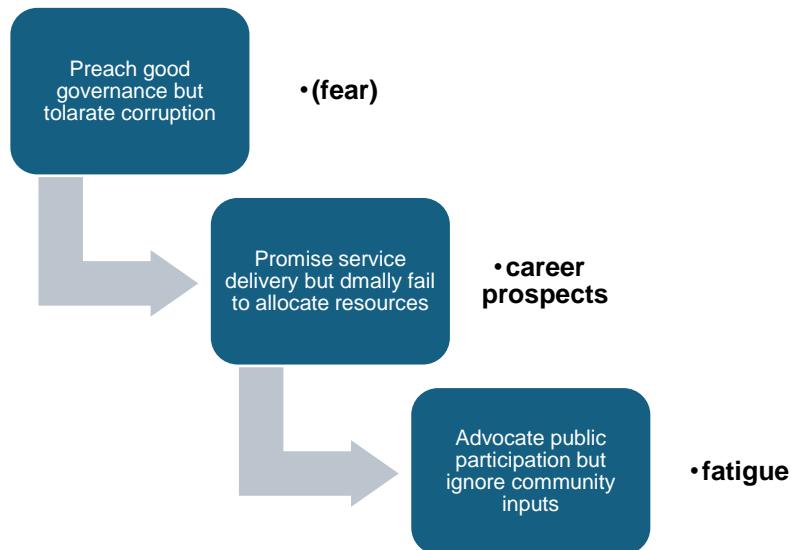
In the SA situation, those who were in the trenches for liberation were seen as the struggle stalwarts, who would lead the nation to better prospects of an inclusive society. Apartheid left deep scars and inequality. High levels of poverty and inequality left complex social and economic challenges. Family structures were eroded by the colonial structures, which were meant to marginalize many African people. Ubuntu in the process was also restructured through the Group Areas Act of 1950, where separate ideologies and tribalism were the order of the day. Bell (2020) posits that the principle of the Group Areas Act was to effect involuntary segregation of races on the basis of colour and further based on tribe in black communities.

There is a plethora of literature on how the present SA arrived at the negotiation table, where the oppressor and the oppressed had no choice but to start negotiations (Balton, 2019; Adam & Moodley, 2023). The Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) emerged as a foundational response to the complex political space of the last leg of the apartheid regime. The vision of CODESA as a multi-party platform aimed at wiping the slate of apartheid and setting the pace for negotiated leadership of the country. Adam & Moodley (2023) interestingly state that the negotiations prominently featured the African National Congress (ANC) delegation. The leader of the ANC and the National Party (NP) led the power-sharing compromise and leadership toward the governance of SA. Challenges emanating from divergent interests, where the oppressed received the majority rule, with the oppressor having to loosen the grip on leadership.

The deep scars are mentioned in passing, where solutions were drafted by the coloniser and the African elite, which was the case in SA. Most senior leadership positions were given to those who fought for the liberation of SA. Often, the challenges of leadership are placed on this challenge, where leaders come straight from leading a revolution. Many questions have been asked: Can someone transition from being a revolutionary to leading massive processes and delivering equity to the masses with a huge budget? Many state organs were led strategically by such leaders in the name of reconstruction and development. The policies they were leading were a negotiated settlement between the oppressor and the previously oppressed. Without judgment, this arrangement seemed like a reasonable, inclusive arrangement of a rainbow nation. The policies and the decisions made during this process were meant to change the lives of the people, whilst furthering the development of the country. The progress of policies had to be monitored and evaluated as they hinged on governance, and removing the injustices in the lives of the previously marginalised.

Cognitive Dissonance in Public Leadership

Weiβmüller and Zuber (2023) lamented that leadership in Africa is significantly challenged by cognitive dissonance, which often affects governance. Leaders grapple with conflicting values and expectations placed upon them by the constituents. Harmon-Jones and Mills (2019) explain cognitive dissonance as individuals seeking to maintain consistency among multiple cognitions (e.g., Thoughts, behaviours, attitudes, values, and beliefs). Yahya and Sukmayadi (2020) further unpack the dissonance theory by postulating that, pairs of cognitions (elements of knowledge) can be relevant or irrelevant to one another. If two cognitions are consonant, there is a natural order between the cognitions. However, a dissonance is observed when there is an opposite order of cognitions. The existence of a dissonance often leads to psychological discomfort, resulting in the need to find ways to reduce the discomfort. In the SA municipalities, cognitive dissonance can be observed as follows:



Own Adaptation

Particularly in environments marked by corruption and a lack of ethical leadership, the ruling class engages in behaviours that contradict their stated commitments to the public good. Njeru (2022) avers that although Africa has strived for independence, the aftermath of colonialism is still lingering in the psyche of leadership, mired with unidentified trauma, which has led to transgenerational trauma. As a result, they impose pain and terror through misaligned governance. Colonialism, politics, and post-colonial leadership have bred transgenerational trauma and are squarely responsible for leadership fatigue. Leadership fatigue further exacerbates and affects other areas of leadership, which would otherwise be running smoothly. The juxtaposition is found in leadership that is post-colonial, but is administered through colonial economic lenses, which leaves cognitive dissonance in leadership.

Leadership in Monitoring and Evaluation

Effective leadership is the cornerstone of functional municipalities in SA, where local governments are tasked with delivering essential services, driving development, and ensuring accountability (Kaywood, 2021). Municipal leaders, including Mayors, councillors, municipal managers, and administrators, play a pivotal role in shaping governance policy implementation and public trust. However, systemic challenges such as poor service delivery, financial mismanagement, political instability, and weak accountability mechanisms often hinder progress. Haque et al. (2021) point out that leadership should not only be about holding positions of authority, but also about vision, ethical governance, and the ability to translate policies into tangible improvements for communities. Strong leadership, amongst other priorities, should foster transparency and accountability through robust monitoring and evaluation systems. Jackals (2023) declares that, when it comes to M&E in the SA municipalities, visible results of poor governance, such as financial, ineffective oversight, and weak accountability mechanisms, are merely surface-level indicators of deeper, underlying issues. Herein, I assert that one of the challenges emanates from the deep scars and orientation of leadership.

Leadership apathy and misalignment are the root causes of M&E failure in municipalities (Mofokeng et al., 2024; Mncwango & Adanlawo, 2025). M&E is challenged by systemic issues such as institutionalised corruption, political interference, and deeply ingrained bureaucratic inefficiencies, which may not be immediately observable through conventional M&E processes. Without committed, technically astute leaders who demand evidence-based governance, M&E systems will remain a challenge, perpetuating service delivery failures and

accountability. The transformation of M&E requires not just systems but leaders willing to confront the uncomfortable truth through transparent inquiry processes.

SA Policy Landscape

South Africa's policy framework for local governance is ambitious in design and uneven in implementation. The country's Constitutional commitment to developmental local government ("Sections 152-153 of the Constitution) resulted in sophisticated and promising tools to guide the IDPs, Strategic Planning, LED, and M&E. All these tools were designed to align planning with service delivery and inclusive localized economic development (The Presidency, 2020). However, the persistent service delivery protest, unqualified audits, and not-so-clear LED projects results reveal a systematic disconnect between policy intent and municipal practice. Literature has revealed that at the heart of these gaps lies a governance paradox. As the world hails SA as having the most progressive policies aligned to results on paper and guided by the Municipal Systems Act (2000) and the National Development Plan Vision 2030, implementation is challenging. Ospina et al. (2021) found that implementation is undermined by political resistance to accountability, siloed departments, and M&E processes reduced to compliance.

Developmental Instruments and M&E

Municipalities can enhance sustainable growth and effective governance by leveraging key development tools such as the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), Strategic Planning, and Local Economic Development (LED) (Maponya et al., 2024). IDP serves as a holistic roadmap, aligning budgeting and service delivery with community needs to ensure cohesive development. Strategic Planning provides a long-term vision, setting priorities and measurable objectives to guide decision-making and resource allocation. Meanwhile, LED focuses on stimulating local economies, fostering entrepreneurship, attracting investment, and creating jobs, thereby improving livelihoods and reducing poverty. Together, these tools enable municipalities to achieve balanced, inclusive, and economically vibrant communities, while ensuring efficient and transparent governance.

M&E in IDP and Strategic Planning

M&E is critical in IDP as it ensures that the tool is effectively implemented, geared for goal achievement, and adaptable to the process (Amin et al., 2023; Nkomo & Adanlawo, 2024). In South Africa, the IDP and Strategic Planning are closely linked processes that guide municipalities in achieving sustainable development and effective service delivery. The IDP is a five-year strategic plan that municipalities must develop in terms of the Municipal Systems Act (Act 32 of 2000). It serves as the principal strategic tool, aligning all municipal functions. Budgeting services, delivery, infrastructure, and economic development) with National and Provincial priorities. On the other hand, Strategic Planning informs the IDP in municipalities on which areas of priority the IDP should be aligned, by identifying key priorities (Department of Cooperative Governance, 2023).

The IDP incorporates these Strategic objectives into a legally binding framework, ensuring alignment with National Development Goals (NDP), Provincial Growth Strategies (PGDS), and the District Model (DDM).

Key Linkages

- ***Vision and Goals:*** Both processes define the municipality's long-term vision (economic growth, poverty alleviation, service delivery)
- Stakeholder participation: Public consultants in strategic planning feed into the IDP, ensuring that community needs are reflected.
- ***Budget Alignment:*** The IDP translates Strategic priorities into funding projects via the municipal budget (MTEF- Medium-Term Expenditure Framework).
- ***Performance Management:*** The IDP includes key performance indicators to track progress on strategic objectives.

Leadership Challenges in M&E

Leadership challenges pose a significant obstacle to effective M&E in SA municipalities' objective of governance and accountability (Owolabi et al., 2024). One key factor, as stated in prior sections of the paper, is cognitive dissonance, where leaders' attitudes, beliefs, and actions are inconsistent with the principles of good governance and M&E. This dissonance has led to a lack of commitment to M&E, inadequate resource allocation, and poor decision-making. Furthermore, leadership's failure to prioritize M&E should hold leaders accountable for issues that indicate a red flag and perpetuate a culture of non-compliance and undermining of effective municipal development tools as mentioned already. Addressing the leadership challenges is crucial for ensuring that M&E systems are utilized to their full potential and contribute to improved municipal performance and service delivery. Below, we depict the synthesised common challenges of leadership in SA municipalities:

Table 1. Genesis of leadership challenges

Challenge category	Example	Impact	Consequences
Political & governance	Political interference in reports	Biased decision making	Wasted resources Eroded public trust Audit regression Service delivery regression
Institutional and capacity	Untrained M&E staff	Delayed and inaccurate reports, ineffective programme adjusted, erosion of public trust, and wasted resources.	Unmet needs, and a lack of accountability in public services

Own Adaptation

The Impact of Weak M&E in South African Municipalities

When Minister Zweli Mkhize was appointed as the new Minister of Local Government, there was a cause for reasonable optimism. At the time of his appointment, SA municipalities were faced with numerous challenges. Poor service delivery was at the top of the agenda, which was evidenced by 173 municipal services protests in 2017. These protests were identified as systemic. The Public Servants Association [PSA] (2015) indicated that service delivery is a complex and demanding task, especially in South Africa. The infrastructural backbone was not designed to be inclusive, and the task of redesigning the entire system to meet the needs of the whole population has been a daunting task for the government, which has been found to be under capacitated. The entrenched systematic problems remain a hindrance to transformation. The continued weak service delivery over time has undermined trust in government, breeding anger in underserved communities.

Upon the appointment of the minister, several challenges were cited. At the top of the list, water service delivery. This led to the report of the Auditor General's findings, where it was stated that 34% of municipalities did not assess the conditions of their water infrastructure during the needs assessment process in 2016. That had a knock-on effect on their strategic planning process in 2016, where 45% of municipalities failed to produce water infrastructure maintenance plans. According to the budgeting procedure, 24% of towns did not set aside any funds for water infrastructure maintenance. Of the municipalities in SA, water costs 41% of their annual water stock due to the poor state of their distribution infrastructure in 2016 (Cook et al., 2021). It is this light that the Auditor General points out that 25% of South African towns lacked a formal management position responsible for monitoring and evaluation. As a result, municipalities would have been unable to adequately monitor their water supply.

The Auditor General report pointed out that all these challenges say nothing about the quality of monitoring and evaluation. Whilst these reports were available, the quality of the reports was unusable, as 45% of these reports showed some level of reliability. This was exhibited by weak human resource controls over the management of staff in 47% of municipalities, which was evidenced by weak capacity reporting (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation [DPME], 2022)

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the IDP ensures that Strategic Planning is not just theoretical, but implements the process through:

- Spatial Development Frameworks
- Service delivery & Budget implementation (SDBIPs)
- Annual performance reviews.

M&E transforms the IDP from a strategic document into a dynamic, results-driven process. The public sector of SA identifies the challenges of monitoring and evaluation as a deficiency. M&E in South Africa has faced significant obstacles because of the substandard, widely known performance of municipalities (Sibanda et al., 2020). Thus, M&E needs to receive wide support and political will to curb the suboptimal performance of municipalities in South Africa. The inefficiencies in M&E systems in SA municipalities can be attributed to various factors, including leadership challenges, especially cognitive dissonance in leadership that stems from the country's historical context. This dissonance in leadership often leads to rationalizations, justifications, or even denial, and hindering effective leadership. Recognizing and addressing cognitive dissonance is crucial for leaders

to maintain authenticity and make ethical decisions. More so, leadership challenges often hinder effective governance and accountability, which are essential for improving M&E practices. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced understanding of the context and a commitment to capacity building and institutional strengthening. By leveraging M&E insights, stakeholders can enhance policies and programs for IDPs, ensure adaptive strategic planning, and foster inclusive LED that is growth and recovery driven.

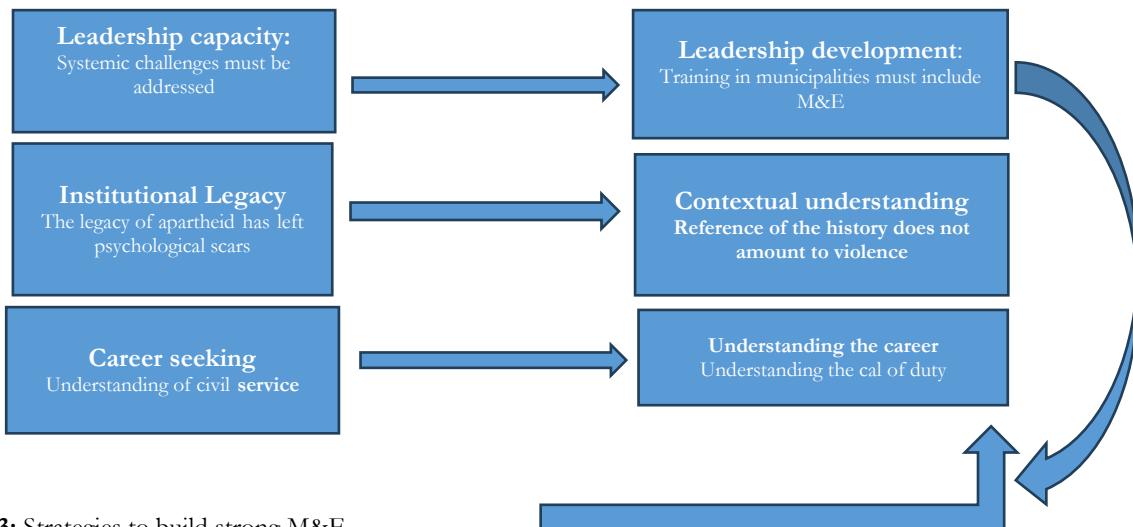


Figure 3: Strategies to build strong M&E
Own Adaptation

Figure 3 proposes strategies for building strong M&E. The right-hand side of this model has a potential of dispelling inefficiencies that weaken M&E in the municipalities. As much training can be sourced in the name of capacity; for as long as we are not prepared to confront the reality, municipalities can continue to do the efficient exercise in capacity development and count losses that make communities lose trust in state institutions. Through all these stages, it is suggested that the M&E process be informed or be part of the information. This will assist in the M&E undertaking and setting their own strategic assessment and performance from the set priorities. Since the IDP is a five-year term plan, at the end of the five years, M&E may assist in issuing a credible review report. The M&E will assist in raising or issuing red flags and gaps throughout the tenure of the strategic planning and IDP for the following term of setting up the strategic plan and IDP for local areas. A vigilant M&E process must be seen and tagged as a measurement of performance for goal setting and achievement. The integration of a robust M&E framework plays a pivotal role in the effectiveness of Five-Year strategic planning and IDP by generating credible review reports at the conclusion of each five-year cycle. M&E not only provides an essential assessment of progress but also highlights critical gaps and potential issues that may arise during the planning period. This proactive approach enables stakeholders to address red flags promptly, ensuring that strategic objectives remain aligned with community needs. Moreover, a vigilant M&E process is indispensable for measuring performance, as it lays the groundwork for informed goal setting and successful achievement. Ultimately, the synergy between strategic planning and M&E fosters a dynamic environment where continuous improvement can thrive, leading to more effective outcomes for communities over time.

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