

Service Provision at the Local Level - A South African Case Study

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Service provision has historically been seen as the responsibility of government. As the ethos of democracy has been promoted across the world, so have ideas such as project sustainability, equal provision and environmental responsibility. Despite the indications of a stronger civil society globally, the following article captures the precarious line that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) walk in the area of service provision in South Africa, post-Apartheid.

Through field research in the Mopani District (Limpopo Province, South Africa) the paper reveals the central role still played by the state in determining who is included in decision-making, what the role of state and non-state actors are in service provision and ultimately, whose interests are served. Despite the state playing a central role in decision-making, analysis of service delivery in the Mopani district indicates that NGO performance in service provision is significantly more sustainable than its government counterpart. This is evident when considering that the method in which NGOs implement water and sanitation projects relates to ensuring that the beneficiaries of the project (the community) are able to take ownership of the project. Studies (and experience) have found that community ownership of a service delivery project increases the probability of a project remaining functional, i.e. decreased vandalism and a greater chance of the community contributing to project maintenance.

The paper therefore, in addition to the above mentioned topics, considers firstly the different agents, and their roles, forming part of service delivery, i.e. international organisations, national and local government, and the community. A discussion of these agents also reveal an interesting concept: even though the state is setting the stage and determining the agents involved in service delivery, the state is to an extent very dependent on the expertise, experience, and insight of NGOs in order to maintain its role of dominance (and being competent) in the eyes of the community. The second aspect considered is the question of whose interests are being served by the current service provision framework. Finding an answer to this question necessitates looking at which agent is the implementing authority and how the identity of the agent influences service provision outcomes. Closely related to this is the level of political accountability practiced by the implementing authority and how political accountability guides service provision outcomes and interests.