

**ELIAS MOTSOLEDI MUNICIPALITY:
THE LEGACY OF WATER AND SANITATION CHALLENGES**

CASE STUDY

Submitted by

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1. Background and introduction

The Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality (EMLM), formerly known as the Greater Groblersdal Local Municipality, is located in the Sekhukhune District Municipality of Limpopo Province. The seat of EMLM is located in Groblersdal. EMLM was established in 2000 as a category B municipality as prescribed by the Municipal Structures Act (No. 117 of 1998) and has a collective executive system guided by section 2(a) of the Northern Province Determination of Types of Municipalities Act (2000). The municipality was named after the anti-apartheid activist Elias Motsoaledi, who was one of eight men (the Rivonia trialists) sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island with former president Nelson Mandela in July 1963 (ANC, n.d.).

The EMLM area is predominantly rural in nature but with a high unemployment rate and elevated poverty levels. The municipality borders Makuduthamaga Local Municipality in the south, Ephraim Mogale Local Municipality in the east, Greater Tubatse Local Municipality, and Mpumalanga's Dr JS Moroka, Thembisile Hani, Steve Tshwete, Emakhazeni and Thaba Chweu local municipalities. It is situated about 180 km from Polokwane, 135 km from Pretoria and 150 km from Nelspruit. The municipality is the third smallest of the five local municipalities in Sekhukhune District, constituting 27.7 per cent of the area, comprising 3 668 334 square kilometers of the district's 13 264 square kilometers. Land ownership is mostly traditional and is spread over sixty-two settlements, most of which are villages. The municipality also has thirty wards (Stats SA, 2011). EMLM's local economy is dominated by the Groblersdal area, which is mostly dependent on mining, agriculture, ecotourism, stock- and game farming as well as an established furniture and tourism craft manufacturing industry.

Data available for 2016 indicate a total population of 268 256 for the area. There are 66 359 households in the municipality with an average size of four per household. Most of the households in EMLM are female-headed (52.3 per cent) and 88.5 per cent of all households live in formal dwellings. The majority of the population is African (97.9 per cent) with other population groups making up the remaining 2.1 per cent. The unemployment rate for the Greater Sekhukhune District was 29.31 per cent in 2018 (Sekhukhune District Municipality, 2020a).

Access to basic services in Elias Motsoaledi municipality in 2016 varied widely according to Stats SA (2018), with 94.7 per cent of households having access to electricity. However, only 63.5% of households had access to piped water. Sanitation was also severely lacking, with only 9.8 per cent of households having access to a flush toilet connected to the municipal sewerage system. The majority of households had to contend with using pit toilets without ventilation (65.3 per cent). A low percentage of households (11 per cent) had access to a weekly public refuse removal service.

The EMLM mission statement in its 2019/20 Integrated Development Plan (IDP) reflects on how the municipality aims to provide services to local communities. The vision and mission of the municipality is in line with the objectives of government as stipulated in Section 152 of the Constitution, speaking

to democratic and accountable governance, sustainable services, social and economic development, a safe and healthy environment, and community involvement. The municipality’s vision statement reflects an aspiration to provide service excellence.

It is against this background that the Elias Moatsoleli case study examines to what extent this mandate has been carried out in communities. Particular attention is paid to service delivery, such as water and sanitation challenges, which impacts on the social and economic development of the municipality and the well-being of its citizens. Water and sanitation has proved to be one of the biggest service delivery challenges that the municipality faces, as is demonstrated by service delivery protests as recent as February 2020.

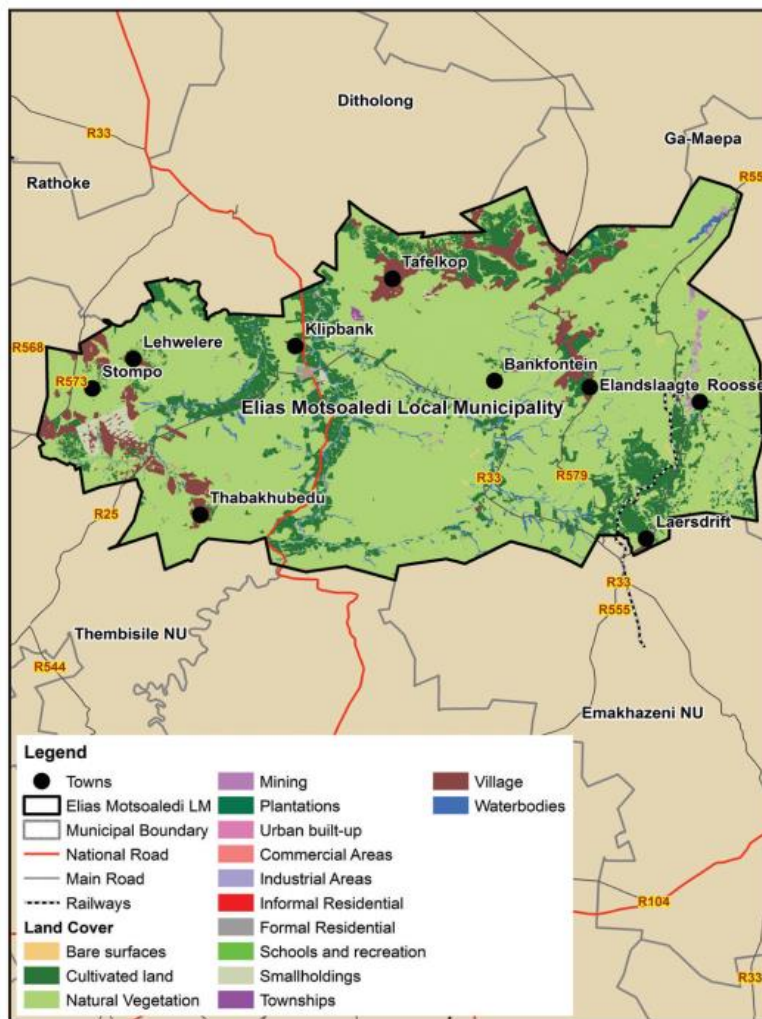


Figure 1: EMLM map
 Source: Housing Development Agency (2015)

2. Political and administrative management

EMLM is currently led by honourable mayor Cllr Julia Lata Mathebe. The African National Congress (ANC) dominates the EMLM council with 41 seats, while the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) has 10, Democratic Alliance (DA) 5, Bolsheviks Party of South Africa (BPSA) 3, Mpumalanga Party (MP) 1, and the South African Maintenance and Estate Beneficiaries Association (SAMEBA) 1 (Main, 2019:155). The EMLM's mission is to ensure sustainable service delivery and to deepen democracy through public participation and communication, transparent service delivery, job creation, environmental protection, and economic growth (EMLM, 2020). A public consultation process led by the municipality has resulted in the identification of various service delivery needs and objectives such as upgrading and development of roads and storm water control, household electrification and installation of high mast lights, waste disposal and management, water and sanitation, recreational facilities, health and welfare facilities, educational facilities, and job creation.

However, achieving these objectives will be challenging if the financial and audit history of the municipality is taken into consideration. The last six municipal audit outcomes were all qualified audit opinions with findings in most instances (See Table 1 for more details). Over this period, regular instances of irregular and unauthorised expenditure were recorded. The three years leading up to the VBS-bank saga¹ as well as the Special Investigating Unit (SIU) investigation² authorised by the President in 2018 were notable for the significant growth in irregular and unauthorised expenditure which had taken place. The larger Sekhukhune district, which includes Elias Motsoaledi, also recorded significant unauthorised, irregular, fruitless and wasteful expenditure for the year 2015/16 of about R452.2m and in 2014/15 in the range of R265.1m (Main, 2019:33).

By late 2019 the municipality had not taken firm action against those implicated in the VBS case. The visit by the Parliamentary Oversight Committee on Local Government and Traditional Affairs revealed that the municipality had been slow in taking action against those implicated. The suspended municipal manager was being paid a salary amounting to R900 000. The Committee was seriously concerned by the lack of action since the VBS saga had had a negative impact on the audit outcome of 2018/19. The chair of the Committee was worried that the VBS matter would affect the 2019/20 audit outcome also:

¹ R1.894 billion was stolen from VBS bank coffers, which led to its liquidation in 2019. Sixteen municipalities deposited R1.6 billion of public money into VBS in contravention of municipal investment regulations. VBS bank was originally the Venda Building Society.

² In 2016 President Zuma authorized an investigation by the Special Investigating Unit (SIU) in terms of section 2 (1) of the Special Investigating Unit and Special Tribunals Act, 1996 into matters regarding the affairs of the Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality and Elias Motsoaledi Local Municipality in the Limpopo Province. Maladministration, improper conduct by councillors and employees, and irregular as well as unlawful expenditure of public money was investigated.

What is particularly regrettable is that the R900 000 is not inclusive of the legal fees the municipality continued to pay to deal with the case of the municipal manager. This matter smells of malicious non-compliance. Many municipalities have long completed the disciplinary process with the municipal manager and chief financial officer, but there is seemingly no commitment from the leadership of Elias Motsoaledi to deal with the matter expeditiously. Fruitless and wasteful expenditure might lead to a regression in audit opinion in the current financial year” (Faith Muthambi; in Patel, 2019).

Looking at the state of service delivery in the municipality it is surprising that money that could have been channeled to service provision was used to cover legal fees and pay suspended officials.

With regard to the financial challenges related to service delivery, it was reported by the deputy Chief Financial Officer (CFO) that it was imperative that all Elias Motsoaledi municipal departments strive to implement stringent individual budget control and that all financial actions be in line with the requirements of the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA) in order for clean audit reports to be obtained.

However, political infighting among councillors representing different parties as well as within the same parties were also cited as having an impact on service delivery. Reportedly, some councillors boycotted their responsibilities towards the communities they were meant to serve (EMLM, 2016:12).

Table 1: EMLM audit outcomes, 2011-2019

Period	Audit outcome
2011-2012	Qualified with findings. Irregular expenditure of R2.3 was incurred for this financial year. Unauthorised expenditure for this year amounted to R42.8 million.
2012-2013	Qualified with findings. Irregular expenditure of R2.8 million was incurred for this year. Unauthorised expenditure was R41.13 million for this year.
2013-2014	Qualified with findings. Financial processing and reconciling controls were considered as inadequate and interventions were required. R69.9 million of irregular expenditure was incurred for this financial year. The bulk of this expenditure related to Supply Chain Management (SCM) processes not properly followed. Unauthorised expenditure was listed as R5.8 million for this period.
2014-2015	Qualified with findings. Performance was generally considered as improving but risk management was considered poor, with interventions required. The municipality incurred unauthorised expenditure of R11.2 million and as a result exceeded the total amount appropriated for a vote of the approved budget. Irregular spending was recorded as R22.8 million.
2015-2016	Qualified with findings. An amount of R64 948 315 was spent irregularly in the 2015/16 financial year, the Auditor General (AG) report indicated. R53.99 million of unauthorised expenditure was recorded for this year.
2016-2017	Qualified report with findings. Unauthorised expenditure in the amount of R80 123 905 was incurred and the total amount appropriated in the municipality’s approved budget had been overspent. Irregular expenditure of R69.9 million was noted for this year.

Period	Audit outcome
2017-2018	Unqualified with serious findings – R82.6 million in irregular spending. An amount of R48.247 million relating to interest from VBS Bank had not been received that amount was disclosed under note 10 of the 2017/18 annual financial statement. The municipality had invested R190 million in VBS Bank but most of it was recouped. An investigation by the Special Investigating Unit was authorised by the President in February 2018 and related to the procurement of goods and services by EMLM, where fruitless and irregular expenditure had occurred. Undisclosed interests of councillors, officials and employees were also investigated.
2018-2019	Qualified report – with a VBS investment write-off of R55 986. The municipal manager was suspended for financial misconduct related to the VBS matter during this period. Most of the R190 million investment was recouped.

Source: Auditor General reports, 2011-2019

Over time service delivery protests have shifted the spotlight onto the ability of local government to provide services. One of the questions posed is whether municipalities are adequately staffed to deal with the complexities of service delivery. In reference to poor audit outcomes by municipalities, the Auditor General in 2019 stated that “Vacancies and instability in key positions slowed down systematic and disciplined improvements and affected the ability of councils to hold individuals accountable” (Auditor General, 2019:10).

It was also indicated that “It is critical that the municipal public accounts committees and municipal councils are adequately capacitated, especially in the area of compliance, to exercise their oversight roles effectively to prevent a situation where municipalities incur unnecessary financial losses, such as making unlawful investments” (Auditor General, 2019:16).

Vacant positions may have played a significant role in EMLM’s poor audit outcomes and in its difficulties with providing adequate services to people. The annual reports from 2011 to 2019 show some instability, in terms of retaining staff and the filling of vacant positions. As is seen in Table 2, vacancies for this period fluctuated widely, from 27.2 per cent (2012/13) of budgeted positions to a low of 3.8 per cent for the 2013/14 financial year. Also, the instability created by the suspension or dismissal of key staff members such as municipal managers and CFOs in 2011 and again in 2018 had a negative impact on service delivery and maintaining good audit outcomes.

Table 2: Vacancies within EMLM

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Number of vacancies	74	99	14	123	104	54	20	43
Total staff complement	269	265	353	343	361	361	367	360
Vacancy rate (%)	21.6	27.2	3.8	26.4	22.4	13	5.2	10.7

Source: EMLM annual reports, 2011-2019

From a review of annual skills development and vacancy rate data for the years 2012/13, 2014/15, 2015/16 it is clear that the municipality struggles with filling its senior posts. As reported by the Auditor General, the reliance on consultants is also a sure sign that the municipality does not have enough competent people in senior and strategic positions. This situation has a trickle-down effect on service delivery and creates an environment which facilitates corruption.

In 2012/13, 11 out of 12 officials in the finance office underwent MFMP training, 5 had BCom Accounting degrees, 2 had a National Diploma in Internal Auditing, 1 had a National Diploma in Business Management, 1 had an MBA, and 2 had Honours degrees in Accounting. There was no CFO or senior supply chain manager for the 2014/15 financial year. A limitation of the annual Workplace Skills Plan g is that its focus is on the finance office only. The report does not indicate the skills levels of employees in other municipal departments.

Aphiri (2016) in his Master's research conducted several focus group interviews looking at the relationship between service delivery protests and crime in Sekhukhune District Municipality (one focus group of ten people was conducted in EMLM). He summarised community grievances, which had led to protests, by highlighting the following points, based on community responses.

- Corruption among political office-bearers and public officials
- Slow pace and poor quality of public services rendered by municipalities, especially those associated with housing provision
- Lack of economic development and employment creation, especially in the youth sector of the population
- Poor governance related to public participation and democratisation of development through ward committees; and
- Unfulfilled promises and expectations created by politicians during election time.

However, many of these findings are not unique to EMLM, corresponding with the findings of Botes et al. (2007:1), who, in referring to the reasons for violent protest in the North West and Free State provinces, spoke about "a volatile Molotov cocktail of genuine grievances about the slow pace of delivery" as well as corruption and poor governance among other compounding factors.

3. Service delivery challenges in EMLM

Basic services are crucial building blocks for improving quality of life, well-being, and human dignity. EMLM faces significant pressure to respond to basic needs with limited budgets and technological capability. The municipality therefore continuously struggles to supply water, sanitation, housing, and electricity.

EMLM is one of five municipalities flagged by the Auditor General for over reliance on consultants instead of capacitating their own finance departments. Cumulatively these municipalities have spent over R159 million in consulting fees. However, there is no evidence of skills transfer during this period. Financial statements are still prepared by external consultants (Sadiki, 2019). Funds used to outsource these services could be better used in providing services to residents and repairing ailing infrastructure.

The Municipal Systems Act (No. 32 of 2000 as amended) establishes duties and responsibilities for all municipalities that include prioritising local community needs, supporting local economic growth, and ensuring that all local community members have access to at least the minimum standard of basic services.

According to the White Paper on Local Government (1998), municipalities must adhere to certain fundamental standards in the services they provide. Municipal services should be available to all and residents should have access to at least a minimum quality of service as a statutory obligation, which ensures a timeous delivery of services that is adequate for the functioning of the community.

Where there are no means of supplying water, especially in farm areas, EMLM services these areas with five water tanker trucks, four of which have a capacity of 5 000 litres and one a capacity of 8 000 litres per day (EMLM, 2008:27). Given the paucity of supply, this municipality has seen a rise in the number of violent service delivery protests in recent years, with people dissatisfied with the slow speed of delivery as well as unethical practices that have become prevalent in the EMLM. In 2019, for example, residents barricaded internal roads and the R25 road with burning tires, rocks, debris and tree branches and trunks, as they demanded that Premier Mathabatha visit the area and listen to their complaints about the provision of services. Concerns varied from inadequate road infrastructure, lack of access to safe drinkable water, and lack of high mast lighting, jobs and schools to the non-electrification of certain areas in Dennilton. In order to calm the situation, Premier Mathabatha assured residents that an imbizo would be held on 22 February 2019, where all MECs and SANRAL members would be present to find solutions to the problems of the district (Sekhukhune District Municipality, 2019).

In another demand – for delivery of VIP toilets, RDP houses and a solution to the water crisis – Tafelkop residents outside Groblersdal embarked on a furious service protest that saw the barricading of the main road with burning tyres, tree branches, trunks and stones, causing the entire street to be blocked. This was a consequence of the district municipality's water and infrastructure development office not reacting to the needs of the communities after several meetings (Sekhukhune District Municipality 2019).

Kanyane (2014:99) states that the protests about service delivery are legitimate and serve as traditional (good or bad) strategies to convey frustration with the state. The number of protest events

within the municipality shows a significant degree of impatience and unhappiness amongst residents (EMLM, 2016; Matlala, 2020). Figure 2 provides an overview of the increase in the number of major service delivery protests from 2004 until 2019 - illustrating a country wide tendency of increasing dissatisfaction with service delivery over time. Service delivery protests in Limpopo represented 6 per cent of the total number of protests in the country in 2019 (Municipal IQ, 2020).

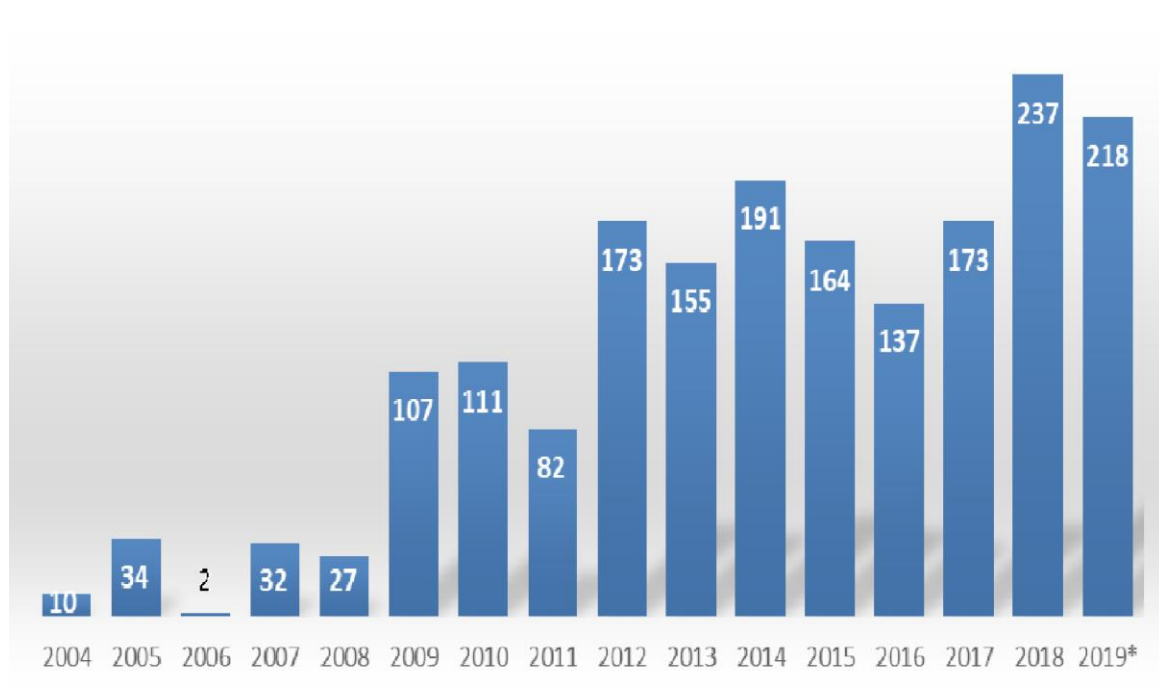


Figure 2: Major service delivery protests in South Africa, 2004-2019

Source: Municipal IQ (2020)

During her tenure, the Mayo, Cllr Julia Mathebe, highlighted a number of pressing service delivery issues. She had to deal with local communities who displayed their dissatisfaction with low levels of service delivery through sporadic civil demonstration and protest action. In the context of problems such as supplying water and the backlogs in waste management services, the state of urban and rural roads continued to deteriorate because of an inability to maintain and upgrade the existing road maintenance vehicle and machinery fleet (EMLM, 2016:8). Most of these problems were ascribed to non-alignment of the budget with the municipality’s IDP and to administrative and community indifference (EMLM, 2016:5). A lack of financial resources to rectify these challenges due to below par revenue collection was also cited as a constraint; as Cllr Mathebe put it, “However optimistic I may be, I cannot lose sight of the financial implications” (EMLM, 2016:19). Cllr E.M. Masemola, the political head of the budget and treasury, provided some context to the revenue collection challenges by saying that EMLM was a rural municipality with high volumes of outstanding consumer debt, which

had issued in non- or under-payment for services (EMLM, 2016:24). The municipality's liquidity ratio and its ability to immediately pay its creditors for the period 2018-2019 was regarded as poor, varying between 0 and 0.7. A figure of more than 1 is regarded as poor and inadequate (Municipal Money, 2020).

In her 2019/20 municipal address, Mayor Mathebe once again highlighted the challenges that communities faced because of service delivery backlogs in road infrastructure, waste removal, electricity supply, support for small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) and a high rate of unemployment, which had contributed to high levels of poverty. The mushrooming of new villages was also blamed for the inability of the municipality to deal with electricity backlogs for 3 112 households. The municipality provided waste management services to 9 934 households, or 16.5 per cent of the total population. This implies that the current waste management backlog is 91 per cent (60 034 households). The backlog on the surfacing of roads stands at 1 222.7 km (EMLM, 2019).

4. The water service provision crisis in EMLM

As mentioned earlier, up to one third of residents of EMLM do not have access to piped water. The major challenge of providing water was acknowledged once again by Mayor Mathebe (Sekhukhune District Municipality, 2020b). Thousands of households have not had clean running water, while in some villages water systems have collapsed, despite the implementation of water infrastructure programmes such as that spearheaded by the 'War Room' initiative set up by Sekhukhune District Municipality to address water shortages (Sekhukhune District Municipality, 2018b). The War Room initiative's main objective was to remove the barriers enabling communities to experience consistent, uninterrupted delivery of water services, including lower rates of water cuts, shortages, leaks, and protests about service delivery (Sekhukhune District Municipality, 2018b:6). Matlala (2019) has reported that Moutse residents of EMLM threatened to boycott elections over a leaking pipe polluting the Moutse River, accusing the Sekhukhune District Municipality of failing to fix the sewer for more than a decade. The sewer spills into the river where some villagers make use of water for domestic and irrigation purposes. Hamilton Bolotini, a community leader, expressed his frustrations thus: "We are afraid that the water will be polluted and if it is not filtered before use, it will result in an outbreak of cholera" (Matlala, 2019). The leaking of the pipe has been reported continually since 2012, with contractors repairing the leakage only to have to repair it again after a few months.

In February 2020, community members accused the ANC government of not making good on its election promises; they allegedly had to spend six months without potable water. This resulted in protest action, in which angry residents blocked access to Groblersdal and Marble Hall to get government's attention. Schools in Sekhukhune were also forcibly closed for three weeks as residents ran amok (Matlala, 2020). Disenchanted communities wanted answers to why a multimillion-rand project to lay pipes from De Hoop and Flag-Boshielo dams was abandoned by a contractor. Answers were also sought to the halting of water supply via tanks despite R12 million having been set aside for

this (Matlala, 2020). This protest was called off only after Human Settlements, Water & Sanitation Minister Lindiwe Sisulu promised R143 million for an immediate water relief project.

The supply of basic water services and the maintenance of waste water treatment plants continue to face challenges. Some of the challenges of providing water are reportedly due to a lack of the basic equipment required to accomplish routine tasks. Among these is a lack of potable water supply at local municipality waste water treatment plants, which makes it impossible for operators to prevent sludge accumulation. Sanitation was reported as one of the most pressing development challenges in the EMLM municipal area. As indicated earlier, on average only 63.5 per cent of households have access to piped water; 65.3 per cent of households have access to pit latrines without ventilation, while only 9.8 per cent have access to flush toilets (Stats SA, 2018).

The EMLM water and sanitation sector plan (EMLM, 2008:26) recognises that the municipality’s surface water supply is reliant on two rivers, the Olifants and the Tonteldoos. No dams have been built within the jurisdiction of the EMLM district. A 2018 report on regional water schemes shows that about 50 per cent of the total population of Sekhukhune is supplied with water, but often at an unacceptable level of reliability due to poor or no water demand management.

The table below shows the sources of EMLM water and their status (whether the water supply system operates effectively or not).

Table 3: The sources and status of water supply in EMLM

Water source	Status
Loskop Dam	Supplies water to a vast irrigation scheme in the areas of Loskop, Groblersdal (67 000 ha) and Marble Hall.
Mahlangu Dam	The dam is registered by the water treatment works for supplying water for domestic purposes. Water supply is sporadic and inadequate because of vandalism. Infrastructure needs to be improved.
Nkosini Weir	This weir is not working because of vandalism at Nkosini Water Treatment Works.
Spitzkop Dam	The dam is full to capacity but currently is not in use. It was intended to serve Spitzkop Water Treatment Works, which has been vandalised.
Rooikraal Dam	The dam is located on the Rooikraal farm but is mostly empty. The dam is owned by the Department of Water and Sanitation and is registered for irrigation purposes.
Olifants River	Supplies water to the Groblersdal Water Treatment Works.
Tonteldos River	Supplies water to the Roosenekal Waste Water Treatment Works.

Source: Adapted from EMLM (2008) and Sekhukhune District Municipality (2018a)

According to the EMLM water and sanitation sectoral plan, ground water also plays a significant role as a water supply for most EMLM residents (EMLM, 2008:28). The area contains small aquifers, which can typically supply populations of 1 800 people at 30l / c / day from one borehole.

There is no formal or routine groundwater monitoring and water quality testing of water originating from boreholes, with close to 50 per cent of the boreholes not in use (Sekhukhune District Municipality, 2018a). Because EMLM is predominantly rural, the supply of water over long distances is not economically viable – hence the high usage of local groundwater sources in close proximity to households. But proper maintenance and monitoring of the boreholes is severely lacking – which impacts on the continued availability of potable water by households (EMLM, 2008). Groundwater is a major water resource for most of the communities in the Sekhukhune District Municipality District and will continue to be in the future. More than 75 per cent of local communities are solely dependent on ground water (Sekhukhune District Municipality, 2018a). By far the greatest number (59 per cent) of boreholes are either not in use, have been abandoned, or have been vandalized or destroyed. Of those in use, 51 per cent are equipped only with hand pumps (Sekhukhune District Municipality, 2018a).

5. Corruption, fraud, and irregular and wasteful expenditure

Maladministration, theft, bribery, fraud and corruption, especially in procurement, are among the major contributors to annual financial losses in the public sector and a major drain on funds required to provide adequate services to citizens. The nature and extent of such fraud and corruption was brought to the public's attention when Co-operative Governance Minister Nathi Mtshwa provided a written reply to a parliamentary question in 2011 that at least ten municipal managers and ten CFOs had been suspended pending disciplinary hearings, and three municipal managers and one CFO had been dismissed on charges relating to financial mismanagement and poor performance. Among these suspended officials were both the municipal manager and CFO of Limpopo's EMLM (Independent Online, 2011).

In 2016, President Zuma authorized the SIU to investigate allegations of misconduct in two municipalities of Limpopo. The unit requested permission to examine the affairs of the greater Sekhukhune and the Municipality of Elias Motsoaledi. Officials from both municipalities faced multiple charges relating to mismanagement, unlawful behaviour, and negligent loss of money or state property (Chiloane, 2016). Matlala (2018) reported that the Limpopo ANC had been blamed for allegedly assisting the speaker with regard to his legal difficulties. EMLM agreed to pay the legal costs of the council speaker, who was accused of assaulting a community member. This led to the Democratic Alliance's protesting against the decision and the accusation that such expenditure was excessive and unnecessary.

In 2018, seven Limpopo mayors were suspended by the provincial government for investing more than R1 billion of municipal funds in VBS Mutual Bank. They face the risk of criminal charges and jail time if convicted. Among these mayors was the mayor of EMLM, who had invested a total of R2.6

billion in VBS Mutual Bank in breach of municipal finance regulations and despite National Treasury warnings (Ledwaba, 2018). The municipal manager and CFO were given seven days to furnish the municipal council with the reasons as to why they should not be suspended. The municipal council also instituted an internal investigation into the officials. Members of opposition parties walked out of the council sitting after declaring their dissatisfaction with the decision to suspend the officials as a precaution instead of immediately suspending them (SABC, 2018). EFF councilor Collen Shai said: “We never agree with these people that’s why we are leaving we don’t have time we’re not happy as EFF we want them to suspend the municipal manager and the CFO with immediate effect” (SABC, 2018).

DA councilor Johan Coetzee also expressed his unhappiness about the resolution to institute internal investigations against the officials implicated in the VBS saga: “We’ve got a problem with the establishment of the board we said that the board must be an independent board appointed not the internal officials of the municipality the speaker of the council never asked for the seconder of that proposal they just went on and accept what they propose that’s why we left the council early before it has been closed” (SABC, 2018).

Unhappiness was expressed with the October 2018 resolution to institute internal investigations against the implicated officials and the fact that senior managers would be investigated by junior officials who did not have the capacity to conduct such investigations. Opposition parties also demanded the suspension of the mayor, whom they accused of having being instrumental in the VBS saga, since the CFO and municipal manager could not have decided on this matter without having consulted the mayor (SABC, 2018).

Also of concern was the death threats made against an opposition councillor. The councillor maintained that the caller had instructed him to defend the VBS investment and to block discussion on the future of the suspended municipal manager (SABC, 2019). At the same time, the South African Municipal Workers’ Union (Samwu) in Limpopo held a prayer meeting in honour of its members who were shot and killed in their local municipality for blowing the whistle on fraud and corruption in relation to the VBS scandal. Aphane, of the South African Communist Party (SACP), said: “These political killings were linked to those murdered in those municipalities who decided to expose the rot and corruption” (Ndaba, 2019).

6. Conclusion

EMLM has made some progress of late, with relative political stability, improved audit outcomes such as the 2017/18 unqualified opinion received, and the lowering of staff vacancy rates from 2016 onwards, but much more needs to be done to ensure the optimal functioning of the municipality in support of the overall wellbeing of residents. There is evidence that service delivery continues to be hampered by high levels of poverty, service delivery debts owed by consumers, and a challenging

rural topography. The SIU investigation ordered in 2016 and the involvement of high-level officials in the VBS saga have also shown the difficulty of maintaining momentum in the progress made, given the political and administrative leadership failures of the EMLM.

The crisis of a lack of resources is most pressing for rural municipalities which are not financially self-sufficient, but which often disproportionately have to carry the burden to implement and support development initiatives. According to the Public Service Administration (PSA) (2015:1) rural municipalities derive up to 70 per cent of their revenue from grants. This compares poorly to the 24 per cent grant dependence for metropolitan municipalities and 28 per cent for non-metro large towns. Yet municipalities interface directly with impoverished communities and are therefore at the coalface of the country's major socio-economic and developmental challenges. It is of great concern that available resources are often underutilised (PSA, 2015:1).

South Africa lacks the qualified and experienced public servants necessary to turn government plans, particularly at local government level, into action (PSA, 2015:2). Existing skilled professionals often prefer to be employed by central government and are also attracted to the large metros. Smaller municipalities rarely have the ability to attract skilled talent. Vacancies typically prevail across the public sector, but are most severe in those municipalities that are often most in need of strong technical capabilities (PSA, 2015:2).

Corruption cuts across the whole South African society and affects everybody. According to Corruption Watch (2020), corruption threatens sustainable economic development, ethical values and justice; it destabilises society and endangers the rule of law. It also undermines the institutions and values of a democracy. With public policies and public resources mostly benefiting poor people, it is they who disproportionately suffer the most from the effects of corruption (Corruption Watch, 2020).

Dependence on the government for housing, healthcare, education, security and welfare makes the poor extremely vulnerable to corruption and stalled service delivery. Corruption often delays infrastructure development and adds layers of additional costs, which impacts gravely on efficient and effective service delivery (Corruption Watch, 2020), ultimately depriving citizens of their constitutional and human rights.

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