




Management and leadership considerations for managing effective monitoring and evaluation systems in South African municipalities



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Background: The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has exacerbated concerns regarding monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices in South African municipalities. Empirical studies conducted in South Africa consistently emphasise the challenges associated with M&E implementation because of weak M&E structures, inconsistent M&E frameworks, inadequate understanding of M&E, a lack of coordination, and insufficient cooperation between oversight institutions and municipalities.

Aim: The study explored the challenges in attaining effective M&E, identifying gaps and limits in its assessment, and ultimately suggesting rigorous ways to assess its effectiveness.

Methods: The study utilised a qualitative approach. Data collection involved in-depth interviews with 13 municipal senior managers before achieving data saturation.

Results: The findings imply that an effective M&E system and its implementation as an essential management tool is fraught with challenges, particularly in municipalities where the concept of M&E has not been fully rolled out.

Conclusion: Municipalities lack adequate capacity as municipal employees and managers are not committed to fully implementing M&E.

Contribution: This study anticipates making a valuable contribution to the existing body of knowledge, offering practical insights and enhancing understanding of M&E practices during challenging circumstances.

Keywords: budget; employee capacity; leadership; management; monitoring and evaluation.

Introduction

Most municipal officials lack substantial experience in monitoring and evaluation (M&E), highlighting the challenges encountered by M&E systems in municipalities (Ngwakwe 2020). The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and its continued transmission have exacerbated concerns regarding M&E practices in South African municipalities. These challenges range from moderate to significant issues in M&E implementation, with an acknowledgement that COVID-19 exposed the depth of these challenges. Numerous empirical studies conducted in South Africa (Eresia-Eke & Boadu 2019; Fraser & Morkel 2020; Khambule & Mdlalose 2022; Mantzaris & Ngcamu 2020; Matsiliza 2019; Ngwakwe 2020; Ngumbela & Mle 2019; Nkonki 2020) consistently emphasise the challenges associated with M&E implementation. They highlight the fact that municipalities face significant challenges because of weak M&E structures, inconsistent M&E frameworks, inadequate understanding of M&E, a lack of coordination, and insufficient cooperation between oversight institutions and municipalities. Given these circumstances, doubts have arisen regarding the effective utilisation of the R20 billion allocated to municipalities to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 crisis (South African Local Government Association [SALGA] 2020). Keeping these facts in mind, this study explored the challenges in attaining effective M&E, identifying gaps and limits in its assessment, and ultimately suggesting rigorous ways to assess its effectiveness in response to crises in South Africa, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study found that without addressing the management and leadership considerations for effective M&E, the ability of M&E systems to contribute to performance improvement, especially during crises such as COVID-19 in South African municipalities, will remain inadequate.

Consequently, this study addressed the question: What management and leadership considerations are essential for managing effective M&E systems in South African municipalities? To investigate this question, two metropolitan municipalities in the Eastern Cape province, namely Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality (NMBM) and Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality (BCMM), were selected to explore the management and leadership considerations for effective M&E systems.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is based on the theory of change (ToC) and resilience theory. These theories provided the conceptual foundation and guiding principles for understanding and interpreting the study's subject matter. The ToC typically focuses on mapping out how and why a desired change is expected to happen (United Nations 2014), while resilience theory explores the capacity of systems to adapt and recover in the face of challenges (Van Breda 2018). Combining these theories provided a comprehensive approach to understanding and addressing the study's research question and objective. Examining the implementation challenges of M&E, the ToC supports municipalities in developing and implementing M&E tools specifically designed to capture the unique challenges and opportunities arising in the COVID-19 era (Mvuyana 2023).

In comparison, the resilience theory benefits municipalities by enhancing their ability to bounce back from adversity, emerging stronger and more resourceful (Walsh 2006). Resilience theory, defined as a dynamic system's potential or demonstrated capacity to adapt successfully to disturbances that jeopardise its function, survival, or development, emphasises adjusting well to significant adversity (Masten 2015; Ledesma 2014), highlighting the significance of incorporating ToC and resilience theory into M&E systems to help municipalities to achieve their goals.

Given the above-mentioned points, Woodhill (2007) contends that the ToC can be represented as a logical framework (logframe), illustrating the connection between inputs, processes, outputs, outcomes, project impacts, programmes, and policies. Concurrently, resilience theory provides valuable insights for informing future research on resilience amidst the challenges in implementing M&E systems, even beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the importance of understanding key assumptions, risks shaping the results chain, and the essential outputs and activities required to achieve desired outcomes. In this context, resilience focuses on the mediating factors or processes that facilitate positive outcomes in the face of adversity (Theron 2016). With municipalities undergoing significant changes during the COVID-19 era, it becomes imperative to continually adapt the ToC to accommodate environmental shifts (Uwizeyimana 2020).

Subsequently, monitoring is a continuous process of collecting data on specific indicators to assess the progress and achievements of a development intervention, such as a project or programme (Kanyamuna, Munalula & Mulele 2019). Monitoring involves systematically checking the effectiveness and efficiency of the intervention during implementation and aims to identify both progress and shortcomings (Kariuki & Reddy 2017). Performance indicators are crucial in monitoring, providing tangible evidence for outcomes and helping to improve future planning. Monitoring is essential for managers to distinguish between failure and success, and it has gained significant importance in recent years. Evaluation, in comparison, involves assessing the value of the intervention, often against the intended results (Gaskin-Reyes 2016; Ile, Eresia-Eke & Allen-Ile 2019). Monitoring and evaluation are complementary and should be integrated into the planning and decision-making processes from the beginning of a project or programme for maximum impact (Fraser & Morkel 2020).

Localising monitoring and evaluation

The Local Government: Municipal Structures Act of 1998 outlines the establishment of municipal committees tasked with formulating, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the activities and operations of municipal councils and their service delivery to communities. Likewise, the *Municipal Systems Act of 2000* is unambiguous about the importance of M&E in local government to the extent that it includes how a municipal council exercises its legislative and executive authority to implement M&E systems. Concerning M&E, Section 11(3) states that a municipal council exercises its legislative and executive authority by monitoring and regulating municipal services, monitoring the impact and effectiveness of any services, policies, programmes, or plans, and establishing and implementing performance management systems. This policy guideline does not prevent or provide any excuses for municipalities not to implement M&E systems in any situation.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, M&E systems have become a critical mechanism in managing projects and programmes within municipalities (Thornton et al. 2022). According to the Auditor General's reports, there is a widespread lack of financial controls and project monitoring, an ongoing culture of a lack of accountability and tolerance for transgressions, which results in a further regression in audit outcomes in municipalities, making improvements rare, and the general trend over the past 3 years has remained negative. Eight municipalities could not adequately support the information reported in their financial statements and received disclaimed audit opinions (National Treasury 2020). This evidence proves the persistent issue of inadequate M&E systems within municipalities and highlights the ongoing challenge of inadequate M&E systems for the effectiveness and efficiency of initiatives and interventions at the local government level (Gxabuza & Nzewi 2021). Therefore, there

is a need to further investigate the challenges associated with implementing M&E systems within municipalities, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Monitoring and evaluation within good governance

Organisational M&E systems involve implementing effective communication processes that support various strategies (Kusters et al. 2017). The importance of communication in M&E lies in ensuring that employees have enough information to provide feedback for progress reports related to service delivery. Effective implementation and sustainability of an M&E system requires the development of institutional capacity, encompassing critical technical and human skills (Kusek, Rist & White 2005). Communication advances coordination, cooperation, and general support tasks, which are crucial for a successful M&E system (Kadel, Ahmad & Basnet 2020). In addition, clear performance indicators are essential for monitoring and providing information about progress towards achieving goals (Gaskin-Reyes 2016).

Furthermore, municipalities must ensure that managers and staff align their roles with the priorities and objectives outlined in the municipality's integrated development plan (Van de Waldt 2018). The organisational challenges include poor alignment with municipalities' strategic plans, a lack of coordination, poor management, and limited government M&E of these organisations within their jurisdictions (Ngumbela & Mle 2019). These challenges are caused by a lack of M&E training opportunities and networks for most personnel in government institutions and municipalities, which is considered a significant drawback (Engela & Ajam 2010). Adequate training is essential for both the custodians of the system and end users (Ile et al. 2019). Once adequate training has been provided, performance agreements can be designed to address the legacy of institutions underperforming. Specifically, adequate training will reduce the lack of accountability that has become characteristic of South Africa's local government (Van der Westhuizen 2016).

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was chosen for this study to explore, describe, and understand realities from an insider's perspective. Adopting a qualitative approach is motivated by a need to discover new ways of understanding, driven by the rapid social changes and resulting complexities in social life and contexts (Schurink, Schurink & Fouché 2022). A qualitative approach was deemed most fitting for investigating the challenges in achieving effective M&E during the COVID-19 pandemic. A purposive or judgemental sampling procedure was employed, selecting participants based on their positions as implementers of M&E strategies in the NMBM and BCMM. Specifically, Section 57 managers were chosen as defined by the *Municipal Systems Act, No. 32 of 2000*. Because of their roles, it was assumed that these

participants would possess knowledge and experience related to M&E, making them suitable and highly informative for achieving the study's objectives (Kumar 2019).

Data collection involved in-depth interviews with 13 municipal senior managers (SMs). Data saturation was attained as the information provided by municipal managers reached a juncture where no new insights or perspectives were being contributed (Guest, Namey & Chen 2020). Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data gathered from the interview schedules to identify themes and patterns of meaning across the dataset concerning the research question (Braun & Clarke 2013). Thematic analysis is recognised for its versatility and flexibility, enabling researchers to understand a studied phenomenon holistically (Nowell et al. 2017). The researcher obtained ethical clearance from the Nelson Mandela University's Research Ethics Committee to conduct the study in the NMBM and BCMM. Throughout the data-collection process, the researcher adhered to the *Protection of Personal Information Act, No. 41 of 2013*, ensuring the respondents' anonymity and confidentiality. This act regards safeguarding personal information processed by public and private bodies, including local authorities (Netshakhuma 2020).

Results and discussions

Themes were established to explore the management and leadership considerations essential for managing effective M&E systems in South African municipalities. This aspect dealt with the responses of municipal managers to questions that sought to assess the effectiveness of M&E systems during the COVID-19 crisis. Table 1 reflects the themes and subthemes.

The analysis in Table 1 illustrates the themes and subthemes that emerged from data analysis. Literature was also used to support and validate the study's findings and interpretations of results. Reviewing literature in this context becomes essential as it provides additional information to be compared with the existing data (Fouché, Strydom & Roostenburg 2022).

Employee capacity

The employee capacity for fully implementing M&E systems in the two selected municipalities emerged prominently as a crucial issue during the interviews. Several studies conducted by various authors affirm that municipalities consistently face challenges because of being under-resourced in terms of qualified M&E personnel, thereby limiting their capacity to deliver reliable M&E services (Kariuki & Reddy 2017; Matsiliza 2019; Munzhedzi & Makwembere 2019). This study concurs with the existing body of research, emphasising the dire need for public organisations and municipalities to enhance the number of individuals qualified to conduct M&E effectively (Ngwakwe 2020). This was also confirmed in a qualitative interview with a SM in the Economic Development Department at the NMBM, who stated:

TABLE 1: Diagram illustrating themes and subthemes.

Themes	Subthemes
Employee capacity and management commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lack of employee capacity for the full implementation of M&E systems • A lack of involvement of managers in M&E measures • Management involvement in the development and implementation of the M&E system • A lack of opportunities to attend M&E training sessions
Insufficient knowledge of evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lack of knowledge regarding municipal project evaluation • A lack of adequacy of M&E systems in the municipalities
Leadership in the field of monitoring and evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lack of good leadership and effective change management strategies, where leaders are attentive to any changes • A lack of political will to implement effective M&E policies • Introducing M&E to all municipal employees
Budget for monitoring and evaluation functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient budget for any M&E functions
Management considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lack of a personal development plan aligned with municipal objectives • A lack of managers' performance agreements • A lack of clear key performance indicators and unspecified municipal targets • A lack of communication in these municipalities to encourage excellent practices in M&E • A lack of receiving M&E feedback from management

M&E, monitoring and evaluation.

'People who work with M&E have the knowledge, even though sometimes when it comes to indicators, we have a problem. There has to be a point where you and I agree on what you [are] going to monitor and what you're going to evaluate. And sometimes, the process of developing indicators don't go well. You find [that] M&E personnel don't have an understanding of what I do. But it's still people who are responsible [for] M&E – they don't have a clue. So it becomes a debate and difficult to change their minds and try to convince them how M&E is practised.' (SM1, female, executive director)

A subtheme emerged regarding the involvement of managers in M&E measures. The findings collectively indicate a notable lack of managerial involvement in M&E measures, posing a risk to developing a robust M&E culture. Research conducted by Munzhedzi and Makwembere (2019) affirms that managers involved in M&E often possess the requisite skills, capacity, and qualifications but lack the right attitude for optimal performance, with attitude problems stemming from various sources, including personal issues. Municipal managers' lack of commitment to M&E measures is a significant concern, mainly as M&E cannot be delegated. During interviews, a SM in the M&E Department at the BCMM validated this sentiment:

'Senior managers do not view M&E as their responsibility and often perceive it as the sole responsibility of the M&E department or unit, when, in fact, M&E is every line manager's responsibility.' (SM2, female, M&E manager)

It is clear that managers are not involved in M&E measures, which can ultimately lead to a weak M&E culture. Unless this issue is adequately addressed in these municipalities and credible performance data are provided, the potential of the M&E system to facilitate performance improvement could be compromised (Hauge 2003).

Another emerging subtheme regards the lack of junior management involvement in developing and implementing the M&E system. A SM from the Disaster Management Department at the NMBM explained:

'On junior level, I would say there could be some improvement where people could be better informed as to M&E, and that this should be rolled out and implemented on a more junior level as well, not just at senior management level.' (SM3, male, director)

Once again, this finding reinforces the observation that M&E is closely associated with top management, highlighting the need for a shift in management perception. The consistency of this finding suggests that the respondents were forthright in their responses.

Regarding the availability of opportunities to attend M&E training sessions, the interviews revealed that senior management members acknowledge municipalities' lack of employee training. Concerning this shortage of training, a SM in the M&E Department at the NMBM expressed that:

'In terms of M&E, I think we have performed below out of a 100%. Because I think obviously there are financial implications as well. When you talk about capacity, you talk about training and workshops; that has not happened at all, even before COVID-19 began.' (SM4, female, M&E manager)

The findings are concerning as they confirm the ongoing issue that a lack of M&E training opportunities and networks for M&E personnel in most government institutions and ministries is one of the main drawbacks to achieving an effective M&E system (Engela & Ajam 2010).

Knowledge of evaluation

Another noteworthy theme that emerged concerns the lack of knowledge regarding municipal project evaluation. The significance is that these municipalities lack the necessary expertise and skills to effectively evaluate municipal projects and M&E activities (Maphunye 2013). This was confirmed during the interview with a SM at the BCMM in the M&E Department, who remarked:

'If I can be specific. [On] the issue of evaluation, as much as we talk about it, no manager really does reflect [it] in his or her department ... So there is a gap.' (SM2, female, M&E manager)

This assertion stands in contrast to the findings of Fraser and Morkel (2020), who argue that an organisation requires a prominent evaluation culture to engage actively in self-reflection and self-examination. Such organisations seek evidence of their achievements using results information to challenge and support their actions based on discoveries. Furthermore, there is a gap concerning the culture of evaluation and values of candour, challenges, and dialogue, not just superficial but genuine commitment.

A subtheme emerged regarding the adequacy of M&E systems in the municipalities reviewed. Most of the participants agreed that there are insufficient M&E systems.

Highlighting a few responses, one SM from the Economic Development Department at the NMBM expressed that:

'In terms of answering your question, how adequate M&E systems are? I would say ... if I were to give the average out of a hundred, I would say 50% because we [are] still a local developmental authority; I think we still have a very long way to go.' (SM1, female, executive director)

Another SM from the Spatial Planning and Development Department at the BCMMD argued that:

'Not effective at all. I think it's where [the] municipality is lacking. For example, there is too much of a gap between reporting cycles. It's good to have your quarterly reports because they are legislated, but in between, someone needs to monitor and interrogate the quarterly reports to check what commitments were made by this particular department and what they fail to achieve. Unfortunately, there is no follow-up in those two months between the two reporting cycles for each quarter.' (SM5, male, deputy director)

This significant gap aligns with the findings of prior studies conducted in South Africa (Eresia-Eke & Boadu 2019; McKegg, Wehipeihana & Pipi 2016), which have consistently demonstrated inadequacies in the M&E systems of these municipalities. Furthermore, recent studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic reveal that the absence of robust M&E systems has led to new corruption patterns in South African municipalities (Mantzaris & Ngcamu 2020; Sibanda, Zindi & Maramura 2020).

Leadership

Research findings regarding municipalities reveal a lack of leadership support and institutional readiness for change management in the context of M&E (Porter & Goldman 2013). The senior municipal managers interviewed in this study echoed similar sentiments, agreeing with the findings regarding municipal employees' perceptions. A SM in the M&E Department at the NMBM shared insights during an interview, stating that:

'The issue of the implementation of M&E needs a lot of change management. People are so used [to] and comfortable with the old ways of doing things. They are not evolving and [do not] meet or align themselves with the changing times out there. Even [we] ourselves are exposed to new systems and new ways of doing things. Therefore, challenging us in executing things, we need to change. But there is that some sort of resistance; people, they're comfortable in the old way.' (SM4, female, M&E manager)

This revelation supports conclusions drawn by Fraser and Morkel (2020), emphasising the crucial role of leadership in any organisation or system, mainly when interventions aim for transformation. The combination of the challenges posed by COVID-19 and corruption highlights how a lack of ethical leadership and effective M&E systems can severely hinder a country's response in times of crisis (Mlambo & Masuku 2020).

According to the subtheme that emerged, there is a lack of political will to implement effective M&E policies. This

observation highlights the fact that the primary obstacles to creating efficient and successful M&E systems include a lack of political will within the government and insufficient institutional skills (Lahey 2005). The qualitative statements further highlight the absence of political will in these municipalities to implement functional M&E policies. A SM in the Disaster Management Department at the BCMMD expressed the following sentiment:

'The municipality is not doing well with M&E. The problem arises when politicians are involved. They flout the M&E because they would tell you that you can't do this, you have to do that, so it is not easy for municipal officials to do well with M&E.' (SM6, male, deputy director)

This finding aligns with conclusions by Fraser and Morkel (2020), who argue that M&E, unfortunately, is often perceived as an administrative function serving political agendas. Consequently, conflicts at the political-administrative interface can undermine or even sabotage genuine efforts by state officials to drive a programme of authentic reflection and adaptation. Furthermore, an investigation into whether M&E had been formally introduced to all employees found a significant gap, and municipalities should address familiarising all municipal employees with M&E. A SM in the Disaster Management Department at the NMBM supported this finding, stating:

'No, it is only known by few employees. I think it is one of the challenges since there has not been a roll-out of educating employees on how to use the M&E systems.' (SM3, male, director)

This statement further indicates that properly implementing an M&E system necessitates a participatory approach, where employees actively demonstrate a commitment to the system's sustainability (Kusek et al. 2005).

Budget allocation

There is a divergence of opinions among SMs regarding whether there is a budget for M&E functions, with some stating there is no budget while others assert that all M&E functions are allocated funds. An interviewee serving as a SM in the Human Settlement Department at the NMBM expressed the following perspective:

'Yes, there is a budget for M&E; for example, I [have] got the operating budget and capital budget. So, those two items should be monitored and evaluated. I agree, as someone who works for the local authority must monitor and evaluate. When you implement service delivery, [it] must be monitored and evaluated.' (SM7, female, deputy director)

A dissenting argument from a participant from the M&E Department at the NMBM opined:

'We have M&E programmes that are totally separate from what is contained in the budget. We have the Service Delivery and Budget Implementation Plan (SDBIP), which is not aligned with [the] M&E budget. There is still room for improvement in this regard.' (SM4, female, M&E manager)

The study's findings emphasise the intrinsic connection between M&E functions and budget and planning processes (Kusek & Rist 2004). It is essential to allocate a portion of every budget for M&E activities to instil it as a cultural practice within the institution. This approach ensures that municipalities derive maximum value for money.

Other management considerations

The interviews revealed that M&E is only included in top management performance agreements. This revelation implies that performance agreements are primarily intended for municipalities' SMs, specifically Section 56 and 57 managers. A SM from the M&E Department at the BCMM provided the following reasons for not managing M&E effectively:

'The reason M&E is included only to the top management is the fact that it's not legislated anywhere in local governments space to people below the Section 56 and 57 managers. I know [that] at some point, there were movements to develop a policy for Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) nationally to cascade M&E down to all levels of employees. The policy is coming; I'm sure soon, they are aware, they are considering it.' (SM2, female, M&E manager)

Performance agreements are intended to counteract the legacy of poor-performing institutions, specifically to reduce the occurrence of service delivery protests, which currently characterise South Africa's local government (Van der Westhuizen 2016). This finding indicates a significant issue that impedes the implementation of best practices for M&E.

Similarly, it was revealed that municipalities have no clear key performance indicators (KPIs) and that municipal targets are unspecified. Gaskin-Reyes (2016) argues that performance indicators are essential to monitoring as they provide information regarding progress towards achieving results. However, the findings indicate that some municipal employees from the municipalities reviewed for this study were unaware of the municipal KPIs and targets. This lack of awareness creates a considerable gap and makes achieving municipal goals and objectives difficult. For best practice, the M&E system requires integrated planning of the relevant entity's purposes, information priorities, underlying values and principles, and roles and responsibilities (Peersman et al. 2016).

Another subtheme was whether these municipalities have good communication to encourage excellent M&E practices. Communication is vital for M&E as it ensures employees have adequate information on service delivery progress (Sebake & Mkhonza 2020). An interesting finding concerned a statement made in an interview by a SM from the Economic Development Department at the BCMM:

'I think the challenge is that we rely heavily on the IT system, which sometimes is not reliable because it has its own challenges. More so now that we also have the load shedding in the mix. So your IT system then will fail because they are very much linked to the power supply.' (SM8, female, director)

This unexpected discovery implies that municipal employees do not receive M&E feedback from management. Without regular M&E reports, which is the case in most municipalities, irregularities or errors are not easily recognised, and adequate corrections cannot be performed in time (Munzhedzi & Makwembere 2019). This exposition contradicts the concept of a 'responsive, accountable, effective, and efficient local government system' to promote transparency and a culture of performance (Porter & Goldman 2013).

The study's findings emphasise the importance of integrating the resilience theory and ToC into M&E systems to help municipalities achieve their goals. However, it is assumed that South African municipalities have sufficient resources and favourable conditions for properly implementing M&E. Incorporating these two theories provides valuable insights for guiding future research on resilience amid challenges implementing M&E systems, extending beyond the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. These theories are pivotal in driving the quest for managing effective M&E systems. Moreover, motivated leadership at all levels is imperative for M&E systems to reach their full potential. Successful M&E systems require collaboration with a diverse workforce, and excluding workers from development and maintenance can render them susceptible to failure (Kusek & Rist 2004).

Conclusion

This article explored the management and leadership considerations essential for managing effective M&E systems in South African municipalities. The study found that municipalities lacked the employee capacity to implement M&E systems during COVID-19 fully. This indicates poor performance in these municipalities because of the appointment of employees not qualified to deal with M&E systems. Moreover, the managers in these municipalities are uncommitted to the M&E measures, revealing significant accountability problems and a complete lack of M&E management.

This study found a lack of understanding of how to evaluate municipal projects, implying that municipalities' reactions to the pandemic were solely focused on the short term. Longer-term priorities must be included in immediate response measures to improve the stability of these municipalities' socioeconomic systems beyond COVID-19. Furthermore, there is a lack of communication on M&E best practices in these municipalities, as the municipal employees reported that there has been no feedback on M&E activities and that M&E systems are weak in their municipalities.

Additionally, because of a lack of communication and accountability in these municipalities, municipal personnel were unaware of local disaster response strategies during COVID-19. Similarly, employees have little confidence and are unaware of KPIs and municipal targets. This implies that during disasters such as COVID-19, employees continued to work despite being unaware of the municipal vision and goals.

Furthermore, municipal employees are not provided with opportunities to attend M&E training courses. Leadership in these municipalities appears to resist effective change management strategies, possibly because of a lack of political will to implement functional M&E policies. This shows that ineffective M&E systems are the primary causes of municipalities' failure to respond appropriately to COVID-19, resulting from a culture of poor performance, poor service delivery, and poor financial management. Moreover, M&E was never formally presented to municipal employees, impeding its successful implementation. Surprisingly, employees are unaware of the budget for any M&E functions. Employees in these municipalities are unsure whether they have a personal development plan to achieve municipal objectives, indicating that employee empowerment is not a priority in these municipalities. Furthermore, M&E solely regards managers' performance agreements and only involves managers in formulating and implementing the M&E systems.

The above-mentioned findings indicate a considerable weakness in these municipalities. The findings imply that an effective M&E system and its implementation as an essential management tool is fraught with challenges, particularly in municipalities where the concept of M&E has not been fully rolled out.

Recommendations

Considering the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed: Amidst disasters such as COVID-19, the Human Resource Department should take measures to ensure that municipalities attract and retain skilled, competent, and ethically sound leaders as public representatives. These leaders are crucial in providing much-needed stability and ensuring municipalities implement the necessary M&E systems effectively. The significance of integrated M&E systems, particularly those built in information and communication technologies (ICT), cannot be overstated during a crisis such as COVID-19. Human resources and line managers within these municipalities should facilitate employee training opportunities in technology to enhance preparedness and response. This proactive approach will equip municipal employees with the skills to navigate technological challenges effectively. Furthermore, it is recommended that municipalities develop M&E systems tailored to the specific needs and conditions encountered during events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This adaptive approach ensures that M&E efforts are finely tuned to address the unique challenges and circumstances during a crisis, contributing to more effective and responsive governance.

Moreover, in times of disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic, political and administrative leadership must collaborate closely with municipalities to instigate transformative measures. This collaboration should prioritise prompt, uniform, and appropriate consequences for accountability failures. The Human Resources Department should play a pivotal role by

providing training to empower line managers, enhancing their evaluation skills, and attracting M&E specialists, specifically those with expertise in handling emergencies. To further strengthen municipal efficiency, the Human Resource Department must ensure that employees' roles and responsibilities align seamlessly with the municipalities' KPIs and targets. Maintaining a comprehensive database that captures each employee's personal development plan is also essential, as this enables the linkage of work-related activities to the overarching vision of the municipality, fostering a more coherent and purposeful approach to organisational goals.

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Authors' contributions

B.Y., S.B.N. and S.P. contributed equally to this research article.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, B.Y., upon reasonable request.

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