

The misnomer of 'service delivery protests' in South Africa: Discourse, governance and institutional accountability

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Background: In South Africa, the term 'service delivery' has become ubiquitous in public discourse, encompassing a wide array of issues from water outages to damaged roads. However, this generalisation often masks the underlying causes of institutional failures and misallocates responsibility.

Aim: This article critically interrogates the discursive framing of 'service delivery protests' in South Africa, drawing on discourse theory and new institutionalism to show how the term's indiscriminate use in public debates depoliticises complex governance failures, reinforces institutional inertia and undermines both accountability and targeted policy responses.

Methods: The analysis draws on recent protest case studies from the Eastern Cape, Limpopo and Free State provinces. Through qualitative examination of protest motivations and outcomes, the article explores how the generalised label of 'service delivery protests' fails to capture the depth of community grievances.

Results: The study reveals that broader structural problems, such as corruption, institutional dysfunction and governance breakdowns, in fact, drive many protests attributed to service delivery failures. 'Service delivery' oversimplifies these complex issues, impeding precise problem identification and undermining accountability.

Conclusion: There is an urgent need for more accurate and differentiated terminology in public discourse and government communication. Clarity in naming specific services and responsible entities is critical for diagnosing root causes, ensuring accountability and designing effective public administration and policy interventions.

Contribution: This study reframes South Africa's 'service delivery' discourse by showing how its general use obscures system and governance failures that underpin community protests. It suggests the need for targeted policy interventions that address root causes rather than symptoms, to reinforce accountability and public governance.

Keywords: public service delivery; public discourse; governance and accountability; service delivery protests; South Africa.

Background

In South Africa, the term 'service delivery' has become a ubiquitous feature of political and public discourse, invoked to describe everything from water shortages to road repairs. While in its generic sense, service delivery refers to the provision of any service, public or private, to a customer or citizen, *public service delivery* denotes the fulfilment of essential needs such as water, sanitation, electricity, education and healthcare by public institutions and their networks. This distinction is critical for accountability: a malfunctioning private telecom line is a general service delivery problem, whereas repairing broken municipal water infrastructure is unequivocally the responsibility of a public authority (Sønderskov & Rønning 2021).

From a discourse-theoretical perspective, however, this distinction is routinely blurred in South African debates. The shorthand 'service delivery' has become an entrenched label that constructs service failures as technical or logistical shortcomings, obscuring their political, institutional and governance dimensions. As Bacchi's (2009) 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' framework suggests, such framings are not neutral; they shape how problems are understood and, consequently, how they are addressed.

New institutionalism helps to explain the durability of this framing. Over time, the language of ‘service delivery’ has become embedded in bureaucratic routines, media narratives and policy communication. As institutional norms and cognitive scripts stabilise, they generate path-dependent responses (Hall & Taylor 1996; March & Olsen 1984), often privileging short-term technical interventions over deeper structural reform. In this way, discursive simplification and institutional reproduction interact to shape how public failures are diagnosed and addressed.

Accordingly, terminological clarity is not simply a matter of linguistic refinement but foundational to sound public administration. Distinguishing between general service provision and public service delivery anchored in specific institutional mandates enables more precise attribution of responsibility and more coherent policy intervention. Without such clarity, failures risk being framed generically, with consequences for accountability, institutional reform and governance effectiveness. Table 1 clarifies the conceptual and theoretical distinctions that underpin the analysis that follows.

Literature review: Service delivery protests and underlying causes

Recent scholarship (2020–2025) has increasingly scrutinised the wave of ‘service delivery protests’ in South Africa, uncovering that these events are symptoms of broader governance and socio-economic failures. Although protests are often sparked by the immediate lack of services such as water outages, electricity blackouts and overflowing sewage, researchers emphasise that protesters’ grievances run deeper than service gaps. A 2023 analysis by Mamokhere and Kgobe identifies a *constellation of factors* driving service delivery protests, including basic service backlogs, poor quality of services, corruption, mismanagement, unresponsiveness of officials, socio-economic inequalities and political patronage (Mamokhere & Kgobe 2023). In other words, communities often mobilise not only because a tap is dry, but because they perceive incompetence or injustice in how their municipality is run (e.g. funds misused, leaders unaccountable). Thusi et al. (2022) similarly argue that many so-called service delivery protests are fundamentally reactions to corruption and bad governance in local government. Their case study of

protests in a South African municipality found that citizens’ ‘cry is for effective and efficient public service delivery (Thusi et al. 2022:134)’ and that chronic maladministration, graft, and leadership failures have eroded public trust to the point that demonstrations and even violent unrest have become frequent. This aligns with widespread media coverage and public awareness that municipal dysfunction, not merely resource scarcity, precipitates unrest (Mamokhere 2020). Indeed, protesters often explicitly demand accountability from officials or decry perceived inequality, rather than limiting their outcry to a single missing service.

Contemporary studies also note the frequency and distribution of these protests as an indicator of deeper discontent (Mubangizi & Gray 2011). South Africa has witnessed hundreds of localised uprisings every year in the past decade. One study counted over 2500 protests related to local grievances between 2007 and 2011 (Karamoko & Jain 2011), and the trend continued into the 2020s. While poor rural villages certainly face severe service deficits, research reveals that protests have been concentrated in urban townships and peri-urban areas, especially in provinces such as Gauteng and the Western Cape (Ngcamu 2019). This pattern suggests that *relative deprivation*, seeing better-served communities nearby and a legacy of urban civic mobilisation help fuel protests, not just absolute service shortfalls. Scholars such as Alexander (2010) have described these protests as a form of *rebellion of the poor*, wherein marginalised groups use collective action to voice frustration with persistent poverty and unmet expectations (Adam 2020). Recent empirical work supports this view: protest activity correlates strongly with municipalities’ failures to provide essentials, reflecting systemic weaknesses in local governance. Many analysts (Chiwawara 2024; Masuku & Jili 2019; Ngcamu 2021) thus interpret service delivery protests as a form of grassroots accountability, whereby communities, lacking other effective channels, resort to public protest to hold officials to their promises. In this regard, Mubangizi (2022) notes that such service delivery protests suggest a growing involvement of communities in service delivery matters beyond the municipal integrated development plans, which are merely a planning tool. For example, Ngcamu (2021) observes that areas with limited formal avenues for participation and poor responsiveness tend to experience more frequent (and often more violent) protests.

TABLE 1: Conceptual clarification of ‘service delivery’ and ‘public service delivery’.

Concept	Service delivery	Public service delivery
Analytical dimension	‘Service delivery’ (Generic/Discursive usage)	Public service delivery (Institutional-administrative concept)
Conceptual basis	Broad, non-differentiated provision of services	Constitutionally and legally mandated provision of public goods
Theoretical anchor	Dominant problem representation (Bacchi 2009)	Public service logic and institutional mandate (Sønderskov & Rønning 2021)
Institutional location	Indeterminate (may refer to any provider)	Clearly located within state institutions and intergovernmental systems
Accountability framework	Often framed as operational or technical failure	Democratic, legal and administrative accountability mechanisms
Nature of failure	Represented as delivery breakdown or inefficiency	May indicate governance failure, institutional incapacity or corruption
Policy response tendency	Short-term technical intervention (repair, restore, supply)	Structural reform, oversight strengthening, institutional redesign
Institutional dynamics	Reinforces routinised administrative scripts	Engages institutional responsibility and reform pathways (March & Olsen 1984)
Analytical risk	Depoliticisation of structural governance issues	Enables accurate diagnosis and allocation of responsibility

Source: Author’s conceptual synthesis drawing on Bacchi, C., 2009, *Analysing policy: What’s the problem represented to be?* Pearson Education, Frenchs Forest; Sønderskov, M. & Rønning, R., 2021, ‘Public service logic: An appropriate recipe for improving serviceness in the public sector?’, *Administrative Sciences* 11(3), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci11030064>; March, J. & Olsen, J., 1984, ‘The new institutionalism: Organisational factors in political life’, *American Political Science Review* 78(3), 738–749. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1961840>

In this sense, protests are not random eruptions over minor inconveniences; they are embedded in a context of governance failures and power imbalances.

Crucially, the literature warns against taking the term 'service delivery protest' at face value but as a theme that speaks to the need for terminological precision. As noted earlier in the discussion, a 2009 parliamentary report already cautioned that the label was misleading, because protests usually involve a multiplicity of factors beyond just service complaints. Recent academic commentary continues this line of critique. For instance, Chiwarawara (2024) points out that many protesters frame their struggle in terms of *justice, dignity and inclusion*, not merely the technical delivery of a service (e.g. they protest being *ignored by officials* or living in shacks while others enjoy proper housing). The blanket term 'service delivery' can obscure these motives. Ngcamu's (2019) literature review found that much of the earlier research on these protests was '*not grounded in any research philosophy*' and often relied on uncritical assumptions. In other words, the discourse was sometimes superficial, treating all protests as alike and driven by obvious service gaps. Ngcamu and others call for more nuanced, evidence-based analyses that distinguish between proximate triggers (like a broken toilet) and root causes (such as corruption in housing allocation or a history of exclusion). This recent scholarship stresses that using more precise terminology and frameworks is not a semantic quibble, but key to understanding and addressing the real issues. For example, Mamokhere (2023) develops thematic categories for protest drivers, such as governance and leadership failures versus infrastructure deficits, to highlight that different problems demand different remedies.

Beyond South Africa, the literature draws parallels with the broader Global South context of governance and public service challenges. Many developing countries face similar tensions between citizen expectations and government capacity, often leading to social unrest. Studies from other African contexts underline that weak governance and a lack of accountability are at the heart of service delivery failures. For example, a 2024 case study in Somalia's Banadir region found that inadequate governance practices (poor transparency, accountability and rule compliance) led directly to *inefficient and unreliable public services*, fuelling public dissatisfaction (Kulmie, Mohamud & Ibrahim 2024). The authors concluded that strengthening governance, combating corruption and enforcing rules were essential to improving service delivery and restoring public trust. This resonates with South African findings: corruption and maladministration consistently undermine service delivery in municipalities, and citizens lose trust when there is no transparency in how funds are used (Mamokhere & Kgobe 2023; Rulashe & Ijeoma 2022). Comparative research highlights the concept of social accountability, defined as ordinary citizens' efforts to hold the state accountable through participatory means (eds. McNeil & Malena 2010). Across the Global South, tools such as participatory

budgeting, citizen report cards and community monitoring of projects have emerged as ways to demand better services. In South Africa, formal avenues for public participation (imbizos, ward committees, integrated development planning forums) exist and are meant to serve this role (Mubangizi 2010). However, when these channels fail to resolve grievances or meaningfully involve communities, protests often become the default mechanism of accountability, essentially a loud form of feedback on government performance. Researchers in governance and development note that these dynamic, frustrated citizens pushing back against poor services, is visible in many countries, from India (with its local protests over water/electricity) to Brazil (over urban services), not just South Africa (Adam 2020). What distinguishes the South African scenario is how routinely and readily the protest discourse is framed in the language of 'service delivery'. The literature therefore suggests that a more *rigorous and explicit terminology* could improve both the analysis and the policy response: for instance, labelling an event a 'governance accountability protest' rather than a generic service delivery protest might force a closer examination of the administrative or political triggers at play (such as the mismanagement of a municipal budget or the ousting of a corrupt councillor). Overall, recent academic work urges moving beyond buzzwords to diagnose the complex interplay of governance, accountability and service provision that defines public protests and discontent in South Africa and similar Global South contexts.

Theoretical framing: Discourse and institutional perspectives

This article is grounded in discourse theory and new institutionalism, which together offer a powerful lens to unpack how language shapes policy understanding and action. Discourse theory, particularly Bacchi's (2009) '*What's the Problem Represented to Be?*' approach, argues that the way problems are framed in public discourse is not neutral but reflects underlying power relations and policy agendas. In the South African context, the term 'service delivery' has become a dominant signifier that homogenises diverse forms of state failure, thus constructing a singular, technocratic view of public unrest. This depoliticised representation privileges surface-level interpretations and deflects attention from structural failures, such as corruption, accountability gaps and institutional decay.

Complementing this, new institutionalism, especially its historical and sociological variants, explains how institutional norms, routines and cognitive frames shape how public issues are interpreted and addressed (Hall & Taylor 1996; March & Olsen 1984). Over time, the uncritical use of 'service delivery' has become institutionalised in government and media discourse, narrowing both problem recognition and solution formulation. Institutions often default to standardised responses (e.g. deploying water tankers) because the conceptual frame of 'service delivery protests' renders deeper governance pathologies invisible.

This convergence of discourse and institutional path dependency helps explain why certain governance issues persist despite apparent policy effort and expenditure.

By situating this study within these theoretical traditions, the article reveals how imprecise language is not merely a semantic issue but a critical barrier to responsive governance and effective public administration. The mislabelling of governance failures as ‘service delivery’ issues reflects and reinforces both discursive hegemony and institutional inertia.

The rise of the term and its uncritical use

The popularity of the term ‘service delivery’ in South Africa grew in the post-apartheid era as the government prioritised extending basic services to all communities. Policies such as the Batho Pele (‘People First’) principles and various White Papers on transforming public service delivery ingrained the idea that government must deliver services efficiently and equitably (Department of Public Service and Administration [DPSA] 1997). Over time, the phrase ‘service delivery’ became common in media, politics, and everyday conversation – a catch-all descriptor for the state of local development. If taps ran dry or garbage piled up, service delivery failed. If communities took to the streets in protest, these were dubbed ‘service delivery protests’ (Day, Cornell & Malherbe 2021). The term is convenient, but this very convenience masks many different issues. Saying ‘service delivery is poor’ could mean anything from a lack of water to uncollected refuse, unaffordable electricity and corrupt tender processes, yet all get the same blanket label. As a result, public discourse often skips over the specifics. Policymakers and citizens may focus on the symptom (‘poor service delivery’) without clarifying which service is delivered by whom and why it is failing. This imprecision can dilute effective problem-solving. It is much easier to bemoan ‘service delivery’ than pinpoint that a particular municipality’s technical unit lacks the skills or budget to maintain water pumps. In short, the term has become a convenient scapegoat for all public sector shortcomings, but that broad brush can obscure the real paint strokes of the problem. It collapses varied issues, technical failures, resource constraints, policy design flaws and governance lapses into a single narrative of ‘poor service delivery’, often without specifying the responsible actors or the nature of the failure. This tendency obscures critical distinctions, leading to superficial diagnoses and generalised responses. Thus, while *service delivery* has become shorthand for state performance, its discursive overreach demands interrogation. It is precisely this conceptual vagueness and its implications for policy clarity and accountability that this article seeks to problematise in the context of South Africa’s evolving governance discourse. I submit that the term ‘service delivery protest’ should be deconstructed to ask: Which service, delivered by whom, failed because of what? Only by unpacking this can policymakers design targeted interventions (whether to fix technical capacity, curb corruption or improve community engagement).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design grounded in documentary analysis to examine how ‘service delivery protests’ are framed in South African public discourse. Documentary analysis is appropriate for interrogating how institutional texts construct problems and shape governance responses (Bowen 2009; Mogalakwe 2006).

Documents published between 2010 and 2025 were purposively selected, including parliamentary reports, Auditor-General findings, media coverage and peer-reviewed scholarship. The three case examples (Eastern Cape, Limpopo, and Free State) were chosen based on: (1) substantial public documentation, (2) variation in sectoral triggers (water, roads, governance), and (3) explicit references to governance or accountability failures beyond infrastructure breakdown.

Analysis proceeded in two stages. Firstly, texts were thematically coded to identify how protests were framed, what causes were attributed and what solutions were proposed (technical repair versus institutional reform). Secondly, drawing on Bacchi’s (2009) problematisation framework and new institutionalism (Hall & Taylor 1996; March & Olsen 1984), the study examined how the label ‘service delivery protest’ shaped institutional interpretation and response, particularly whether it encouraged path-dependent technical interventions rather than structural reform.

Triangulation across official documents, media narratives and scholarly accounts strengthened interpretive rigour. The aim was not to reconstruct protest events descriptively, but to analyse how discursive framing interacts with institutional logics in shaping governance outcomes.

Real-world examples behind the buzzword

Eastern Cape water crisis – a case of infrastructure and capacity: Consider the rural Eastern Cape, where communities have been protesting over water (Ellis & Jubase 2023). In October 2023, frustrated villagers from 68 villages in Middledrift marched to the provincial offices in Bhisho to demand clean, piped drinking water. These residents were not merely complaining about a slow municipal repair; they highlighted that some villages had been without water for years: in one area, no piped water since 2018. Under the banner of a land rights movement, the protesters vowed ‘harsher action’ if authorities ignored their pleas for water access. However, why were thousands of people without this basic service for so long? Part of the answer lies in massive infrastructure backlogs and institutional incapacity. One district municipality estimated it would need R20 billion (or 20 years) to eliminate its water supply backlogs in all villages. That staggering figure points to deeper issues: decades of under-investment, ageing or non-existent infrastructure and insufficient funding streams. Moreover, it was reported that the municipality had even returned unspent water

infrastructure funds to the Treasury because it failed to implement projects on time (Damba-Hendrik 2023). This illustrates a classic 'public service delivery' failure rooted in governance: the money was available, the need was dire, yet poor planning and execution left communities dry. By calling the ensuing protest a 'service delivery protest', one might imagine it is just people impatient for a water truck. In truth, it was an outcry against a systemic collapse in the local water provision system and the institutional ineptitude that allowed budgeted funds to go unused. At the same time, people resorted to muddy stream water. The Eastern Cape case demonstrates how framing the protest as a 'service delivery' issue reduced it to an infrastructure deficit, despite evidence of deeper institutional failures in planning, financial management and project implementation. This discursive representation directed attention towards restoring water supply rather than addressing structural governance weaknesses, illustrating the link between problem framing and path-dependent administrative response identified in new institutionalism (March & Olsen 1984).

Limpopo's road and water protests – trust erodes in local government: In February 2025, residents of Phafola village in Limpopo had had enough after years of inadequate services, dusty, crumbling roads, washed-away bridges, and a lack of clean water. They responded in a now-familiar fashion: barricading the N11 highway with burning tyres and rallying for change. This too was widely described as a 'service delivery protest' (Civicus 2023). What the Phafola community wanted was for the Mogalakwena Local Municipality to take *immediate action* to fix their long-neglected road (the D1958) and address the water shortages. When provincial officials came to negotiate, an interesting proposal emerged: the Limpopo Public Works Member of the Executive Committee (MEC) suggested that a nearby platinum mine might fund the road repairs through the Department of Public Works. The community's response? Rejection. Residents refused the idea of a mining company bailout, citing a lack of trust in the government's financial management. In their view, channelling money from the mine through the same municipality or department that had failed them was a recipe for more corruption or misuse. This incident shows that the protest was not just about a pothole or two but a referendum on governance and credibility. The term 'service delivery protest' hardly captures this nuance. The people of Phafola were protesting the breakdown of trust in public institutions to spend funds honestly and effectively. They were tired of seeing projects initiated and never completed, allegedly because local politicians 'demand cuts' from contractors. Sadly, this pattern is not unique to Phafola, such allegations surface across many municipalities. Thus, Civicus (2025) reports that the Phafola protest was more about accountability rather than about filling potholes. Calling it a generic service delivery issue risks overlooking that dimension of public accountability, where citizens feel compelled to rise up because conventional oversight has failed them. The Phafola case further demonstrates discursive depoliticisation. While media narratives described the protest as a 'service delivery' event, protesters explicitly articulated mistrust in municipal financial governance and

accountability mechanisms. The institutional response centred on infrastructure repair proposals, including potential private-sector funding, rather than addressing credibility deficits and oversight concerns. This pattern illustrates how dominant framing shapes institutional responses by directing attention toward technical fixes, such as infrastructure repair, while neglecting underlying issues of governance legitimacy, including public trust, financial accountability, and oversight.

Free State's Nketoana protest – corruption and collapse: Another vivid example unfolded in May 2025 in the Free State's Nketoana Local Municipality. Hundreds of residents marched to the municipal offices demanding that the provincial government place Nketoana under administration (Moloi 2025). Years of broken service promises had led to boiling frustration. Some communities still relied on bucket toilets and had intermittent water supply, despite being nearly three decades into democracy. Protesters' complaints went beyond just the lack of services; they directly accused local leaders of corruption and self-enrichment. One organiser stated that 'politicians are disturbing the development of our municipality because they go out demanding money from contractors, hence projects are not finished'. Another protester lamented, 'We will never get any services under this corrupt leadership', as the crowd's memorandum called for a Special Investigating Unit probe into the municipality. The background is that media investigations had earlier found an unfinished sports facility in Nketoana town where R15 million had been spent with nothing to show (Moloi 2023). In another case, a school construction was delayed because the municipality had not paid the contractors. The issue was not that the town lacked a stadium or a reservoir per se – but mismanagement and alleged graft had consumed the budgets with no service delivered. Residents marching with signs saying, 'No more corrupt leadership' are sending a message that is lost if we reduce it to 'they are angry about service delivery'. They are angry about public services not being delivered *as a result of governance failures*. The Nketoana protest shows the danger of the misnomer: calling it a service delivery protest might imply that the fix is simply delivering more or better services, when the community was pleading for *administrative intervention and clean governance* as the only way to get those services. The Nketoana protest most clearly exposes the limitations of the 'service delivery' label. Here, grievances were explicitly directed at corruption, procurement irregularities and leadership failure. Yet the broader public framing continued to situate the unrest within the category of service delivery protests. This disjunction underscores Bacchi's (2009) insight that problem representation shapes solution space: when governance breakdown is reframed as delivery failure, institutional inertia is reinforced, and structural reform is deferred.

Calling protests 'service delivery protests' is problematic

South Africans have witnessed countless community protests, often characterised by street marches, road blockades or violent unrest. The media and officials routinely

label these as *service delivery protests* (Pithouse 2009). However, analysts and scholars have long warned that this label is a misnomer, an inaccurate name that oversimplifies reality. A report commissioned by Parliament in 2009 noted explicitly that ‘the term [*service delivery protest*] is a misnomer’ because, while unmet service needs (a lack of water or bad roads) might spark discontent, the causes of protests are far more varied and complex (Mbuyisa 2013; Netswera 2014; Twala 2014). In other words, community uprisings are not only about absent tap water or potholes – they often stem from deeper frustrations. A parliamentary report identified a ‘*multiplicity of factors*’ underlying these protests, which can be grouped into at least three broad categories (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa 2009):

- Systemic issues, such as maladministration, fraud, nepotism and corruption, for example, corrupt allocation of RDP housing or jobs for pals breed resentment.
- Structural problems, such as widespread unemployment, land disputes, inadequate healthcare and long-term socio-economic issues, are beyond one broken service.
- Governance failures include weak leadership, a lack of accountability and the erosion of public trust in officials. Poor communication and unresponsive local councils also leave citizens feeling ignored, leading them to resort to protest.

Labelling all these eruptions of public anger simply as ‘service delivery protests’ paints them as if people are rioting only because a specific service was not delivered (Görgens & Van Donk 2011). In reality, protesters often say their grievances are as much about how they are governed as *what* tangible service is missing (Adam 2020; Modiba 2021; Xolani, Mkhize & Mlambo 2022). A 2021 study observed that these protests have been primarily an urban phenomenon, with about half occurring in Gauteng and Western Cape alone, even though rural areas face worse service deficits (Sekhaulelo 2021). Anyone familiar with South African realities knows that if a lack of services were the sole trigger, rural villages (many of which still lack water, roads, or electricity) should be the main hotbeds of unrest. Instead, protests concentrate in townships and informal settlements near cities, where people can directly see the contrast with better-served areas (Pilusa 2024; Sekhaulelo 2021). This suggests that relative deprivation, perceived inequality and the history of civic mobilisation are at play, not just service gaps. In short, calling these ‘service delivery protests’ mischaracterises them as simple service complaints when, in fact, they are often manifestations of anger at deeper governance and socio-economic failures.

The ‘service delivery’ misnomer as a mask for systemic governance failures

The categorisation of diverse community protests under the umbrella of ‘service delivery’ has analytical consequences. Framing public unrest as a technical failure of delivery narrows the perceived locus of the problem to infrastructure breakdowns or logistical shortcomings. However, empirical evidence suggests that many protests reflect deeper

dysfunctions in governance and institutional capacity. Chronic failures in public service provision are frequently associated with systemic governance deficits, including corruption, patronage-based appointments, weak financial oversight and administrative incapacity (Currin 2025). These structural conditions undermine state capacity and contribute to the recurrent breakdown of essential services.

From a discourse-theoretical standpoint, representing protests as ‘service delivery’ issues depoliticise grievances by recasting governance failures as operational deficiencies (Bacchi 2009). This framing reduces institutional accountability to questions of efficiency rather than integrity, oversight or democratic responsiveness. As scholarship on protest dynamics indicates, communities often mobilise in response to perceived exclusion, a lack of voice and erosion of trust in local authorities (Booyesen 2009; Hirsh 2010; Karamoko 2011). When formal participatory mechanisms fail to provide meaningful engagement, protest becomes an alternative channel of accountability. The generic label ‘service delivery protest’ therefore obscures the governance dimensions embedded in these actions.

New institutionalism further illuminates how such framing shapes policy responses. Once institutionalised, these narratives shape policy responses by encouraging officials to interpret problems through familiar lenses and to apply routine, previously accepted solutions. (Hall & Taylor 1996; March & Olsen 1984). In this context, protests framed as delivery failures often elicit short-term technical responses, such as emergency infrastructure repairs or temporary service provision, rather than structural administrative reform. These path-dependent responses may alleviate immediate symptoms while leaving underlying governance deficits intact, thereby reproducing cycles of protest and reactive intervention.

Analytically, distinguishing between infrastructure failure and governance breakdown is therefore essential. Where protests stem from procurement irregularities, weak oversight or administrative incapacity, technical remedies alone are insufficient. Precise problem representation enables more appropriate institutional interventions, including strengthened financial management, leadership reform and enhanced participatory governance mechanisms. In this sense, terminological precision is directly linked to institutional accountability and sustainable public administration reform.

The impact of imprecise language on policy and perception

Describing every community uprising as a ‘service delivery protest’ not only dulls the specifics, but it can also skew policymaking. Policymakers might chase numeric targets for ‘service delivery’ (how many houses are built, taps installed, and others) to show that they are responding without fixing the broken systems behind those numbers. Indeed, South Africa has poured billions into infrastructure in the last two decades, and many areas have seen improvements.

However, protests persist, and in some years, even increase, because people protest the qualitative aspects: corruption, inconsistency, unfairness and incompetence – issues that raw service delivery stats do not capture. Government data monitoring protests reflect some of this complexity. For instance, Municipal IQ (which tracks community protest trends) found that the immediate triggers of protests can shift. In one month, all major protests were sparked by electricity blackouts and water cuts during rolling power outages (Stoddard 2024). However, a year later, with blackouts eased, those issues accounted for only 24% of protests, as other grievances (such as governance or election-related issues) took the forefront (Stoddard 2024). The point is that the label ‘service delivery protest’ lumps together a protest overload-shedding (a mostly national issue of electricity supply) with one over a corrupt ward councillor (a local governance issue) as if they are the same phenomenon. This could mislead the public and decision-makers to assume that the solution is one-dimensional. Suppose we think the problem is simply that services are not delivered. On one hand, we might miss the fact that services are not delivered because of deeper governance problems, whether misappropriated funds, a lack of technical skills or poor planning. On the other hand, being specific in language forces a more specific remedy. Talk of a ‘water service strike because of infrastructure collapse’ directs officials to restore water *and* fix the infrastructure management. A ‘municipal governance protest’ would signal the need for oversight bodies or interventions in that municipality’s administration.

The imprecise use of ‘service delivery’ also affects public perception of protests. It is easy for some observers to dismiss protesters as simply impatient or destructive if all they hear is that people are rioting over a broken service. However, when one appreciates that these protests are often the desperate last resort against unaccountable governance, they are reframed as part of a demand for dignity and justice in how communities are treated. South Africa’s post-apartheid history of protests, from anti-apartheid marches to the more recent #FeesMustFall student protests, shows that public demonstrations are often about louder calls for respect and inclusion, not trivial complaints. By sharpening our terminology (e.g. saying ‘community governance protests’ or ‘basic services and accountability protests’), the narrative shifts from ‘riots about service delivery’ to ‘uprisings against failure of governance and basic rights’. This is not to romanticise violence or disruption, but to correctly identify the cause so that responses address root issues and not just symptoms.

Moving towards clarity and accountability

The South African public, media, and policymakers must use more precise language when discussing these issues. Words shape our understanding. If we continue to use ‘service delivery’ as a catch-all phrase, we risk discussing whether a problem is one of policy, capacity or integrity. Instead, we should differentiate: is this a public service delivery

infrastructure problem (such as an ageing pipe network), a public administration problem (such as corrupt officials) or a broader socio-economic problem (such as unemployment driving unrest)? Often, it is a mix, but dissecting it is the first step to practical solutions. Public administration scholarship urges a systems approach, recognising that public service delivery happens through complex institutional systems and intergovernmental relationships. Failure in one link (for example, a municipal water department) might be caused by failures in another (provincial oversight or national funding). Vague talk of ‘poor service delivery’ will not capture those nuances, but precise specifics will.

For policymakers, acknowledging the misnomer means changing how they respond to protests. The government should not only reflexively treat each protest as a demand for a *thing* (a tarred road, a new clinic) in isolation but also as feedback on governance. This could mean pairing service rollout plans with governance reforms, including deploying competent managers or financial controllers to failing municipalities, fast-tracking investigations of corruption and engaging communities in decision-making so that citizens feel heard between elections. In the Nketoana example above, protesters explicitly asked for the Special Investigating Unit – essentially saying the solution is to root out corruption so that services can flow. In many other protests, communities form committees to insist on monitoring new projects (because they have been burned by empty promises before). The government should embrace civic participation rather than treat it as an antagonism.

The takeaway is to be careful with terminology for the public and students of public administration. We should question headlines about ‘service delivery protests’ and ask: *what specific service failures are at play, and why did they occur?* Moreover, importantly, *who* is responsible? Is it the local municipality, a national department or even a private contractor failing to deliver on a public tender? Clarity on these points directs accountability appropriately. It also helps in comparative analysis and scholarship, for instance, distinguishing protests primarily about socio-economic exclusion (jobs, land) from those about the collapse of municipal functions. Both get called service delivery protests in South Africa but may require different policy cures.

Beyond its South African context, this study contributes to public administration scholarship in three ways. Firstly, it demonstrates how problem representation, as conceptualised by Bacchi (2009), shapes administrative diagnosis and policy response, thereby foregrounding the constitutive role of language in governance practice. Secondly, by integrating new institutionalism (Hall & Taylor 1996; March & Olsen 1984), it shows how discursive frames become embedded in routinised administrative logics, reinforcing path-dependent responses that privilege technical remedies over structural reform. Thirdly, the article extends debates on protest and accountability by illustrating how public unrest functions not only as a demand for services but also as a signal of institutional legitimacy deficits. In doing so, the study

advances a discourse, institutional approach to analysing state capacity and accountability in contemporary public administration.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the widespread framing of community unrest as ‘service delivery protests’ narrows complex governance failures into technical delivery lapses. Drawing on discourse theory, particularly Bacchi’s problematisation framework, the analysis shows how this representation shapes public understanding and policy response by depoliticising structural issues such as corruption, administrative incapacity and accountability deficits. The term functions not merely as descriptive shorthand, but as a constitutive frame that influences how problems are diagnosed and what remedies are considered legitimate.

From an institutional perspective, the routinisation of this framing reinforces path-dependent responses that privilege short-term technical interventions over structural reform (Hall & Taylor 1996; March & Olsen 1984). When protests are interpreted primarily as delivery breakdowns, state responses tend to focus on immediate service restoration rather than institutional redesign, oversight reform or leadership accountability. In this way, discursive simplification and institutional reproduction interact to sustain cycles of protest and reactive governance.

The policy implications are significant. Where unrest stems from procurement irregularities, political interference or weak financial management, technical remedies alone are insufficient. Accurate problem representation is therefore a precondition for effective institutional intervention. Differentiating between infrastructure failure and governance breakdown enables more precise allocation of responsibility, strengthens accountability mechanisms and supports sustainable public administration reform.

Theoretically, this study contributes to public administration scholarship by demonstrating how discursive framing and institutional logics jointly structure governance outcomes. It advances debates on protest and accountability by showing that language is not peripheral to administration but central to the construction and reproduction of institutional responses. Reframing the discourse around public unrest is therefore not a semantic exercise, but a governance imperative. Terminological precision enhances diagnostic clarity, strengthens the social contract and supports more responsive and accountable state practice.

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CRedit authorship contribution

Betty C. Mubangizi: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

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