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Developing Transformational Strategies to Improve the Accessibility of E-Governmental Services in the South African Local Government

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Abstract:

Access to electronic governmental services is an important element of effective governance, particularly in developing nations such as South Africa, where there are still differences in access and skills to digital technologies. With the growing significance of digital transformation for effective governance, there is an urgent need to develop strategies that facilitate all residents' access to electronic governmental services. This paper concentrated on devising transformation strategies to boost access to electronic government services within local governments in South Africa. This qualitative paper employed existing literature and case studies to formulate strategies aimed at enhancing access to digital government services. The paper evaluated how the accessibility of electronic government services affected the responsiveness and effectiveness of the provision of local government services. Moreover, it also examined the impact of socio -economic factors on the accessibility of electronic services provided by municipalities in South Africa. This included the assessment of the citizens' perceptions of the use and accessibility of the current electronic government services of the municipalities of South Africa. The findings demonstrated that although electronic governmental services have great potential to enhance local governance in South Africa, their accessibility depends on a solution to socio-economic imbalances, infrastructure limitations, technological obstacles, and trust issues. The paper provided strategies for fostering the access of local government electronic government services in South Africa. As a result, the findings of the paper contributed to growing knowledge on electronic government strategies to improve service delivery and promote good governance practices in South Africa.

Keywords: E-Governmental Services, E-Government, South African Local government, Accessibility

INTRODUCTION

Rapid technological progress has motivated many governments around the world to adopt electronic government as a means of improving the performance and services of states (Mouna et al., 2020). Other governments around the world see electronic government as a way forward to improve government services accessible to both the market and society (Bojang, 2019). As stated in the work of Mokgolobotho and Nkgapele (2024), the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are global programs that address major problems, such as poverty, inequality, climate change, education, and healthcare by 2030. Electronic government initiatives directly contribute to some SDGs by

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promoting transparency, accountability, and inclusive access to services. In South Africa, the National Development Plan (NDP) defines the vision of a more inclusive and prosperous society. This emphasizes the need for a capable and developing state that can effectively provide services to citizens. This indicates that the use of digital technologies to improve the provision of government services plays a key role in achieving SDGs and harmonizing national strategies, such as the South African NDP.

Several studies have shown that many developing countries around the world use electronic governments (Naidoo, 2012; Saeed et.al, 2013; Maseko, 2018; Malomane, 2021). In South Africa, electronic government has also been adopted as an alternative service delivery method by many different sectors of the government, including the local government, to improve its response to service delivery (Jackoet-Salie, 2020). Although electronic government functions well in terms of improving the distribution of public services, it must be noted that not all electronic government services are easily accessible digitally. Olivier and Murenzi (2017) believe that South Africa is affected by socioeconomic disparities, which significantly impact the accessibility of e-government services. This is further supported by Mello and Shai (2019), who alluded that many citizens, particularly in rural and underprivileged urban areas, lack access to the necessary digital infrastructure, such as reliable Internet connectivity and personal computers. On the other hand, elevated data costs further restrict internet usage among low-income households.

AbdulKareem and Oladimeji (2024) indicated that there is an urgent need to implement digital literacy programs in an attempt to equip citizens with the skills needed to effectively navigate and utilize electronic government platforms. By contrast, infrastructural limitations in rural areas have emerged as a hindrance to the widespread adoption of electronic government services (Mensah, 2020). Therefore, ensuring access to public services for all citizens, especially marginalized and socioeconomically disadvantaged, remains a major challenge (Blom & Uwizeyimana, 2020). This issue mostly persists in the local governments. As an illustration, some authors have indicated that the local government of South Africa continues to suffer from insufficient provision of public services (Mamokhere, 2023; Thusi et al., 2023; Thusi & Selepe, 2023; Nkoana et al., 2024). Makalela (2019) pointed out that the lack of public services has led to the lack of adequate public services such as adequate housing, water, and road infrastructure.

However, Section 152 of the Constitution of South Africa strongly indicates that the local government has an obligation to ensure the sustainable provision of services to the community, promote social and economic development, and promote a safe and healthy environment. This suggests that South Africa's local government has a duty to supply essential services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure upkeep to its citizens. It is important to acknowledge that a large portion of the population, especially those unable to afford private-sector services, relies on public services, making it crucial to assess their quality. In response to growing demand for services, the government must redefine and restructure the delivery model, focus on consumer centricity, and create innovative delivery methods.

In response, to current issues faced by the municipalities in the nation, Kanyemba (2017) portrays a belief that for the local government to be fully responsive to societal demands

requires easy-to-use and accessible technological advances, such as government online services. South African local government has made progress in implementing electronic government, as seen by metropolitan municipalities, such as the City of Tshwane, offering citizens more accessible and efficient ways to interact with municipal services. Consequently, this serves as proof that, in South Africa, embracing digital government services is a crucial step in modernizing public administration and enhancing public service accessibility, particularly within local governments. There are five stages of electronic government as indicated by the work of Van Jaarsveldt (2004):

Table 1. Stages of electronic government

Stages	Explanations
Emerging	The government in this stage has an official online presence
Improved	In this stage, the government increases the information on the site and becomes more dynamic.
Interactive	In this stage, residents can download forms, e-mail officials, and interact through the web.
Transactional	Residents in this stage can pay for services and other transactions online.
Seamless	At this stage, there is a full integration of e-services.

Determining which stage is South Africa and how South Africa can move to the seamless stage is of paramount importance. From Table 1, it can be inferred that South Africa possesses characteristics of improved interactive and transactional e-government. This is due to the fact that while individuals can obtain various forms from government websites, the system is not entirely interactive and transactional. In terms of job opportunities in the public sector, individuals need to download the Z83 form, fill it out by hand, and deliver it to the appropriate municipality. Thus, South Africa's electronic government is presently not at the seamless stage, characterized by the complete integration of electronic government services, but rather remains between the interactive and transactional phases. However, South African municipalities are constantly trying to execute electronic government initiatives, although they face several challenges in the process of fully implementing e- government. South Africa has been actively developing its digital government infrastructure and services to ameliorate efficiency, transparency, and accessibility in public service delivery (Apleni & Smuts, 2020). The government has inaugurated various online platforms and portals, providing citizens with access to a wide range of services, including applying for identity learners and driver licenses, paying municipal bills, and applying for tenders (Jackoet-Salie, 2020). In summary, the current state of electronic government in South Africa reflects a concerted effort by the government to leverage digital technologies to improve service delivery. However, there is still room for improvement, particularly in addressing socioeconomic and infrastructural contexts and ensuring the security and privacy of citizen data. Local governments continue to work on expanding electronic government services and infrastructure to reach more citizens and improve the overall quality of public service delivery.

This highlights the urgent need to develop strategies to enhance the accessibility of e- government services in the South African local government. The South African local government has invested significantly in infrastructure and digital initiatives to support this digital transition. However, access to these services and their usefulness are influenced by a variety of socioeconomic factors, such as income levels, education levels, and digital literacy, and this digital service can change how different people benefit. In light of the above, this study evaluates how the accessibility of electronic government services influences the responsiveness and effectiveness of local government service delivery and the impact of socioeconomic factors on the accessibility of e-services provided by local governments in South Africa. Citizens' perceptions of the usability and accessibility of current e- government services in the South African government were also assessed to develop strategies to improve the accessibility of electronic government services.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach, and it is exploratory in nature, which is aimed at gaining a comprehensive understanding of the factors that affect the accessibility and usability of electronic government services within the South African local government. The research was heavily based on secondary data to construct arguments, theories, underpin discussions, and draw conclusions. The data were obtained from recognized and peer- reviewed sources, such as academic journals, books, official government releases, reliable websites, local government legislative records, and other authenticated databases. Key platforms for gathering data included Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, JSTOR, and institutional libraries to guarantee that all the information is trustworthy and supported by evidence. To

seek relevant data, the study made use of main concepts such as "The accessibility of e-governmental services" "Socio-economic factors on the accessibility of e- governmental services" and "Citizens' perceptions of the usability and accessibility of current electronic governmental services in the South African local government." The data included in this research are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Data Included in the Paper

Authors Details	Title of The Paper	Year Published
Agangiba, M. and Kabanda, S	Towards a conceptual framework for e-government accessibility for persons with disabilities in developing countries.	2016
Dollie, M & Kabanda, S	e-Government in Africa: perceived concerns of persons with disabilities (PWDs) in South Africa.	2017
Maramura, T.C, Dambuza, P & Jaka, H	Realizing E-government access for socio-economic development in rural areas.	2017
Mabinane, L.T & Edoun, E. I	E-Government Awareness and Usage in South Africa: Some Insights from Residents in Gauteng.	2018
Kassongo, R.F., Tucker, W.D & Pather, S	Government facilitated access to ICTs: Adoption, use and impact on the well-being of indigent South Africans.	2018
Kariuki, P., Ofusori, L & Goyayi, M	E-government and citizen experiences in South Africa: Ethekwini metropolitan Case study.	2019
Mkhonto, M	The critical success factors for e-Government implementation in South Africa's local government: Factoring in apartheid digital divide.	2019
Blom, P.P & Uwizeyimana, D. E	Assessing the effectiveness of e-government and e-governance in South Africa: During national lockdown 2020.	2020
Shkarlet, S., Oliychenko, I., Dubyna, M., Ditkovska, M. and Zhovtok, V	Comparative analysis of best practices in e-Government implementation and use of this experience by developing countries	2020
Mayedwa, M & Van Belle, J. P	E-government actor's perspective: A case of local municipalities in South Africa.	2021
Nokele, K.S & Mukonza, R.M	The Adoption of E-Government in the Department of Home Affairs–Unpacking the Underlying Factors Affecting Adoption of E-Government within the Selected Service Centres in Limpopo Province, South Africa	2021
Galushi, L.T & Malatji, T. L	Digital Public Administration and Inclusive Governance at the South African Local Government, in Depth Analysis of E-Government and Service Delivery in Musina Local Municipality	2022
Nel-Sanders, D & Malomane, A	Challenges and best practices for e-municipalities.	2022
Enaifoghe, A., Dlamini, N.P., Jili, N.N. & Mthethwa, R	The role of e-government as enabler of good governance for socio-economic development in South Africa.	2023
Mayedwa, M., 2023	Towards the implementation of a fully-fledged electronic service for citizens: the case for local government in South Africa.	2023
Terrance, M. T	The e-Municipality in South Africa as a Panacea for Adopting and Implementing Sustainable Online Services: A Case of the City of Tshwane.	2023
Zindi, B	Evaluating the impact of digital governance in improving service delivery in Eastern Cape Municipalities.	2024

Ehlanzeni District Municipality	Online submissions & services.	2024
Nkgapele, S.M	The Usability of e-Government as a Mechanism to Enhance Public Service Delivery in the South African Government: Lessons from Practices.	2024

This study employed a content analysis method for data analysis, concentrating on a systematic examination and interpretation of the existing literature to recognize patterns, trends, and common themes linked to electronic government accessibility and usability. Thus, by systematically gathering information from various sources, content analysis enabled the study to qualitatively assess elements such as the occurrence of particular socio- economic challenges, public opinion, and accessibility concerns within the South African electronic government context.

RESULTS

Socio-Economic Factors Affecting the Accessibility of E-governmental Services in the Local Government of South Africa

Local governments are best positioned to bring the vision of the electronic government into light because they are closer to the communities. The electronic government has the ability to empower institutions to improve operations and achieve desired goals. Furthermore, trust between citizens and the government can be built through electronic government. The aforementioned statements highlight the possibilities of electronic government being a breakthrough that both citizens and governments have been waiting for. However, a study conducted by Maramura et al. (2017) in the Nkonkobe Municipality in the Eastern Cape Province revealed that despite the general number of people having access to Information Communication Technology (ICT) exceeding 50%, there were still inequalities in the availability and accessibility of electronic government services. Moreover, the majority of citizens were able to access information through digital means such as radio, television, and SMS, but these digital means could not be used to make online applications, submissions of important information, and make online payments due to a lack of Wi-Fi access, mobile gadgets, and computers. Consequently, these challenges play an adverse role in hindering the socioeconomic development and quality of the service delivery system. It is important to highlight that local governments are responsible for tackling these challenges to guarantee successful implementation of electronic government initiatives. When questioned about the sluggish advancement of electronic government, the previous provincial government premier in Eastern Cape expressed the opinion that a lack of ICT skills was prevalent among government officials and the wider South African population (Mayedwa & Van Belle, 2021).

Nkgapele (2024) is on a similar view that South Africa faces difficulties of inadequate talented ICT graduates. This shows the socioeconomic issue of poor education and training within society. It can be argued that citizens possess skills that are not in demand, while some lack access to education due to being socioeconomically disadvantaged. Human action is the most crucial element during the implementation process of electronic services to the citizen's portals, meaning that the lack of skilled personnel within all levels of government poses a threat (Mayedwa & Van Belle, 2021). Furthermore, despite the Mhlonoto municipality (2018-2022) prioritizing the use of ICT to ensure the availability of ICT infrastructure in accordance with ICT governance policies and strategies, the municipality still faces the challenge of a lack of IT staff to implement ICT projects. This suggests that Mhlonoto Municipality might fail to effectively provide services to its citizens because it does not have adequate IT personnel to help implement ICT projects. Another case study includes the Metsimaholo Local Municipality which disclosed that they are facing a capacity constraint to assist with IT needs (Mayedwa & Van Belle, 2021). It must be noted that such occurrences hinder the accessibility of these e-governmental services. Thus, it can be contended that most municipalities struggle to implement electronic government effectively because of a shortage of skilled employees. Furthermore, the lack of proper infrastructure in rural centers such as Waterberg and Sekhukhune in Limpopo, delays the progress of electronic government services (Nokele & Mukonza, 2021). This is because the intranet is not as fast as expected.

In the aforementioned study by Nokele and Mukonza, an official expressed frustration over the frequent outages of the Internet and intranet systems, which delayed electronic responses to communication and emails. Clearly, the functionality of electronic government services in South Africa does not cater to most users, particularly those in rural regions. Enaifoghe et al. (2023) suggested that the South African digital gap shows notable inequality in ICT availability within South African provinces. Access to data communications and voice differs from highest to lowest, depending on household income status. This demonstrates that people living in poverty are not able to access voice and data communication due to a lack of sufficient income to afford the Internet. Thus, due to high access fees relative to income, Internet penetration is poor and broadband Internet is priced out of reach for the majority of households. The study conducted by Kassongo et al. (2018) on the Cape Access programs located in the District Municipality in the Western Cape Province, in six small towns located in Overberg, revealed that poor and underprivileged households chosen from these municipalities still face challenges of excessive socio-economic inequality, due to the apartheid policies. Therefore, the circumstances of such disparities go as far as affecting the access to e-governmental services, and use of ICT. This demonstrates that, even after moving from the apartheid era, poor and underprivileged households continue to suffer from apartheid policies. This highlights the need for the government to go back and re-address the issues of inequalities faced by poor people in South Africa to allow them to be part of the whole society and get access tomunicipal services they deserve.

The Cape Access program uses e-centers to provide services to citizens. Employment is deemed one of the key leading factors that influence the citizen's use of government services provided online at e-centres (Kassongo et al., 2018). However, only 35.6% of the surveyed households comprise two employees per household, while the majority of households comprise a single person or do not work. The above-mentioned statement shows that the majority of households face a remarkable level of unemployment. Despite many working on farms, they still receive very little remuneration. This demonstrates that the Cape Access program may have been implemented in an area where citizens' needs will not be met because the majority of people do not have jobs. As a result, this highlights the challenge of Cape Access not improving e-government accessibility. Challenges such as language gaps can impede the implementation of e-government services. For instance, the South African government departments utilize the English language as a medium of communication to communicate with citizens (Nokele & Mukonza, 2021). As a result, one of the participants in the above study, the Sekhukhune Centre in Limpopo, expressed how the language barrier hinders community members from participating in e-governmental services, which delays their efficiency as a center. It is argued that some people might have had an interest in e-governmental services; however, they had no one to translate the information from English to their home language. This highlights the need for e- governmental services to have an option for consumers to select the preferred language to enhance the accessibility of these services, as the majority of society does not fully understand English, particularly in rural areas.

Citizen's Perception of the Usability and Accessibility of Current E-governmental Services in the South African Local Government

The significance of electronic government in South Africa would be to allow citizens to exercise their democratic rights digitally (Piderit & Jojozi, 2017). This would mean that the usefulness of electronic government would be realized when citizens were able to fully access government data through electronics. However, the study conducted by Mabinane and Edoun (2018) revealed that only 34.6% of the South Africans reported that they know what electronic government is. This means that only a small percentage of South Africans are aware and knowledgeable about electronic government. This could mean that the local government is not putting much effort into making citizens aware of the electronic government. This highlights the urgent demand for the government to launch frequent e- government training sessions to raise awareness. To support the above-mentioned statement, participants in the study conducted by Galushi and Malatji (2022) in the municipality of Musina Limpopo argued that they have no idea what electronic government is and how it is being utilized. In a similar vein, one of the interviewees in the study conducted by Kariuki et al. (2019) indicated that it's been more than a decade living in the eThekwini municipality and they have never heard anything about electronic government services. The government seems to have dumped the electronic government system on people without fully demonstrating how it works for them. One of the participants explained that they knew about the

Internet system for paying household bills, but it was not convenient for the people of Musina because it did not have the financial means to purchase data for facilitation. It is then clear that one could contend that provinces such as Limpopo, which have low unemployment rates, may require more time to implement electronic government services effectively.

Building on the previous points, one participant expressed frustration over the continued difficulties in accessing electronic government services, particularly in home affairs or traffic departments, as evidenced by the persistence of long queues. Electronic government is anticipated to decrease the occurrence of queues; however, little progress has been made. These issues should be resolved through the government-to-citizen (G2C) category. The G2C category is purposed to serve citizens online without them vising government offices, to eliminate long queues, overcrowding in government departments, as well as paper-based recruitment (Jean-Paul van Belle, 2023). This highlights the need for South African local government to revisit their electronic government strategies to improve community service delivery. Dollie and Kabanda (2017) posit that electronic government is now perceived to be a catalyst for public participation in South Africa although it continues to face a number of challenges in implementation. Moreover, one of the challenges in the implementation includes the lack of inclusivity of People with Disability (PWD) in the process of designing websites. It can be argued that most initiatives in South Africa do not accommodate PWD. Even if they accommodate them, they will still be required to attend special schools, which are costly, not bearing in mind that not every PWD has the financial means to attend special schools. One of the participants in the study conducted by Dollie and Kabanda (2017) expressed how difficult it is to see the little captions on the forms, especially if you do not have access to Firefox or Webvism, which supports people with blindness and improves web accessibility. Without these tools, it becomes difficult to fill in the form if there is no one around to assist, and these tools are expensive or require one to attend special schools.

This demonstrates that living with a disability in South Africa is still a challenge that affects many people. Another participant lamented that the government seemed to forget them when passing laws. This is because the government is not working to ensure that everyone, including PWD, has access to information without any problems. This implies that the government has not yet taken responsibility for supporting and prioritizing people with disabilities. Furthermore, one of the participants in the investigation conducted by Kariuki et al. (2019) on the citizens' experiences with electronic government, lamented that it is challenging to afford data in order to access the internet because of being unemployed. This proves that the issue of unemployment remains the biggest challenge faced by people and limits their right to access government services. Another participant in the same investigation articulated that it is very concerning that the E-Thekwini Metropolitan Municipality cannot make means to offer basic training on ICT to those who are unable to use the internet (Kariuki et al., 2019). This implies that everyone is expected to know how to utilize technology without acknowledging the fact that not everyone has the ability to use it. However, one participant further alluded that they were happy with the metro adapting to new technologies because it is fast, saves time, and is quick. Other participants posited that they had good experience in utilizing electronic government services because they were efficient. Reflecting on the aforementioned statements, it can be argued that some people are happy and ready to step into the digital world and learn more about technology.

The Impact of E-governmental Services on the Responsiveness of Local Government of South Africa

At the local government level, e-municipality has the ability to improve the efficacy, efficiency, and effectiveness of public service provision in the municipalities of South Africa (Blom & Uwizeyimana, 2020; Nel-Sanders & Malomane, 2022). The aforementioned statement shows that even developing countries, including South Africa, can transform from a traditional way of service provision to a digitalized way. Nkgapele (2024) alludes that remarkable progress on electronic government services has been made by the majority of metropolitan municipalities. The statement is aided by Molobela (2023) when he posits in his study on the e-municipality in South Africa, that e-Tshwane is acknowledged as one of the systems that increases capacity and is committed to adopting and implementing digital projects. This implies that Tshwane Municipality is putting much effort into ensuring that electronic government services are accessible. As a result, the implementation and adoption of e-governmental services in the City of Tshwane (CT) has enhanced engagement among

businesses, citizens, and arms of government in the city (Molobela, 2023). Furthermore, because of e-Tshwane, homeowners, companies, and property managing agents are able to engage with the City atany time. The aforementioned statement suggests that citizens are now at the advantage of accessing government services in the comfort of their own homes without overcrowding the municipality. With regards to the City of Johannesburg (CoJ), efforts have been made to adopt and implement e-governmental services such as e-payments, e-statements, and e-recruitments, to improve service provision. As a result, citizens residing at the CoJ are able to make online payments, apply for online jobs on the municipal website, as well as accessing statements online, 24 hours a day (Nkgapele, 2024). This implies that citizens do not have to travel to the municipality to submit job applications or pay for services. Therefore, this puts people at the advantage of accessing services at home anytime they want.

However, it is imperative to consider that not everyone has access to mobile cell phones, network connectivity, electricity, or money to buy data. This suggests that adoption and implementation do not accommodate them. Accessing government websites requires mobile data; hence, people who are unemployed find it difficult to apply for jobs online. Furthermore, the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality (BCMM) has implemented electronic governmental services including the system of electronic payment, smart metering, and social media participation, with the aim to improve citizen engagement, increase service provision, and optimize resource allocation (Zindi, 2024). Therefore, the electronic payment system gives citizens access to various electronic payment methods, such as online banking, mobile wallets, credit/debit cards, water and electricity bills, and municipal services. It is argued that these electronic methods of payments are convenient because they allow citizens to make payments in the comfort of their own homes without feeling the need to make payments in person. Moreover, the municipality has put in place smart metering solutions for electricity and water with the aim of improving resource utilization, improving service provision, and modernizing utility systems (Zindi, 2024). This implies that citizens will efficiently use municipal services, such as water and electricity, as they monitor the amount of water and electricity they consume. Consequently, losses and waste are reduced. However, smart meters can pose security risks as they are vulnerable to cyber-attacks and hacking. Consequently, consumers might find themselves paying a lot of money for the problems they do not create.

Ehlanzeni District Municipality (EDM) has implemented e-EDM, which is a secure, free online service that enables residents, businesses, property agents, and tenants to interact with the municipality digitally (Ehlanzeni District Municipality, 2024). The platform allows users to submit meter readings, pay traffic lines, lodge queries, apply for services, view statements, and make account payments from anywhere at any time using their computer or mobile phone. This demonstrates that municipalities are eager to transform the local government system into a more digitalized and modernized manner. As a result, such initiatives could possibly restore the reputation of local governments, as they were deemed useless. Nonetheless, e-government initiatives can only succeed if individuals have confidence in the government's handling of their personal data. Thus, if the government fails to protect information, it will lose the trust of people. Consequently, public participation will be compromised. Moreover, the study conducted by Piderit and Jojozi (2017) in the Makana Local Municipality discovered the success of the MobiSAM platform. The MobiSAM platform made it easier for citizens to report service delivery issues using many platforms and enabled interaction between citizens and the local government through their mobile cell phones. This demonstrates that the implementation of e-government improves citizen engagement with the local government. However, a challenge arises when not everyone is able to interact and access e- services because they do not have access to smartphones. As a result, some citizens feel outcasts in their own communities.

DISCUSSION

The provision of electronic governmental services by local governments in South Africa is influenced by socioeconomic factors. Despite being well positioned to introduce electronic government projects, local governments face substantial challenges in ensuring equal access. For example, studies in Nkonkobe Municipality in the Eastern Cape have revealed disparities in accessing electronic governmental services, even though over 50% of locals have ICT access. Most residents depend on radio, TVs, and SMS for updates, but they lack essential tools such as Wi-Fi, mobile gadgets, or computers required to effectively engage with online government offerings. These infrastructural

deficits contribute to slow socioeconomic progress and poor service provision. Furthermore, a lack of skilled personnel compounded these issues. The scarcity of ICT professionals within governmental bodies, along with insufficient training for the general population, jeopardizes the effectiveness of electronic governmental services. Municipalities such as Mhlonoto and Metsimaholo persist in dealing with IT staff shortages, adversely affecting the timing of critical electronic governmental initiatives. In addition to infrastructural and expertise challenges, the digital divide across South African regions poses another significant hindrance. Studies show marked differences in ICT access between affluent and less affluent homes, with the latter struggling to cover Internet costs due to elevated data expenses. This problem is especially acute in rural regions where poor broadband infrastructure obstructs the uptake of e-government services. For example, rural areas in Limpopo, such as Waterberg and Sekhukhune struggle with slow intranet speeds, which complicates communication with government services. In addition, lingering socioeconomic disparities stemming from apartheid-era policies continue to impact poor and underprivileged families, as demonstrated by the Cape Access program's challenges in fulfilling citizen needs within impoverished communities. Employment status is also influential, as high unemployment rates restrict citizens' capacity to engage with e- government services, particularly in areas such as Limpopo. Language barriers further constrain electronic government access, particularly in rural areas. The main use of English in government communication excludes many non-English-speaking individuals, limiting their involvement in digital services. Studies conducted at the Sekhukhune Centre in Limpopo revealed that community members who do not understand English encounte difficulties in accessing e-government services, suggesting the necessity for more inclusive language options on digital platforms. Additionally, electronic government platforms in South Africa frequently neglect to support people with disabilities, increasing their exclusion from accessing government services. Supportive tools for individuals with disabilities, such as those for the visually impaired, tend to be costly and difficult to obtain. Therefore, both socioeconomic and demographic factors, including language and disability, play a role in unequal access to electronic governmental services.

Electronic governmental services in South Africa have influenced local governments' responses, showing a mix of advancements and challenges. Projects, such as e-Tshwane, have notably improved government effectiveness and citizen participation. Services such as online bill payments, electronic statements, and electronic recruitment in key areas such as Tshwane and Johannesburg have made government services more accessible to residents from home. However, disparities in accessing these services arise from high data costs, insufficient digital literacy, and infrastructure gaps, which lead to an uneven distribution of e- government benefits. Additionally, while electronic government measures such as smart metering and social media engagement in the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality (BCMM) enhance service delivery and resource management, there are ongoing concerns about personal data security and cyber threats. Programs such as MobiSAM in Makana Local Municipality highlight the positive potential of electronic government to boost citizen involvement and responsiveness to service issues, although this is mostly limited to those with digital access. Consequently, despite hopeful progress, lingering socio-economic inequalities in South Africa restrict the full impact of e-government on enhancing local governance andservice provision.

In conclusion, the research findings indicate that accessing electronic governmental services remains a major challenge for local governments in South Africa, influenced by socioeconomic, infrastructural, and technological factors. To tackle these challenges, local governments must increase investments in ICT, expand Internet infrastructure, and consider data cost subsidies or provide free public Wi-Fi in key locations. The attitudes of citizens in certain municipalities revealed that there is inadequate knowledge among citizens about the use of electronic governmental services. This underscores the need for awareness programs that can equip the local population with the skills to effectively engage with digital government services. Countries such as Estonia, Denmark, and South Korea have successfully ensured that electronic governmental services are accessible (Shkarlet et al., 2020), because of their broader Internet access, which guarantees comprehensive access. South African local governments can adopt this model to improve digital public-service accessibility. Consequently, the government must invest more in the ICT sector to address shortages of talent and improve internet connectivity in rural regions. The study also highlighted that people with disabilities (PWD) face challenges in accessing digital government services. Agangiba and Kabanda (2016) suggested that to provide full digital service

access, the government could introduce assistive technologies for PWD. It is important to note that electronic government complement rather than replace traditional government services, allowing society to access municipal offices when there are issues with online services.

CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that the electronic government has the capacity to improve the service delivery system of the South African local government. The measures taken by local governments to implement electronic governmental services have shown good progress, especially with electronic payment systems. However, evidence demonstrates that citizens residing in rural areas and PWD struggle to access electronic governmental services. Despite efforts to introduce electronic government in rural areas, factors such as poor infrastructure, poverty, unemployment, and a lack of education still hamper the accessibility of electronic governmental services. Therefore, the paper study suggests that the government should start by addressing existing societal problems so that the accessibility of electronic governmental services can accommodate non-identical members of society. The paper further illustrated that there is a need for the government to provide extra assistance to socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals in rural areas using monthly data to enhance the accessibility of electronic governmental services. Furthermore, frequent monitoring and evaluation of the accessibility of electronic governmental services must be undertaken to ensure full accessibility to these services. This is to ensure that the local government are able to provide digital services that are inclusive, effective, and beneficial to all residents.

Conflict of Interest

All the authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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