

Towards A Capable and Ethical State: Evaluating Public Service Professionalisation and Its Impact on Service Delivery in South Africa

Dr. John Motsamai Modise*

Tshwane University of Technology

Received: 21 / 05 / 2026

Accepted: 29 / 06 / 2026

Published: 10 / 07 / 2026

Abstract: South Africa continues to experience persistent public management challenges despite an extensive constitutional, legislative, and policy framework designed to promote accountable, ethical, and developmental governance. This article examines the recent challenges confronting public management in South Africa, focusing on governance failures, corruption, state capture, institutional capacity, ethical leadership, accountability, public service professionalisation, and service delivery. The article further evaluates current public sector reforms and proposes practical strategies for strengthening governance and building a capable, ethical, and developmental state. Although South Africa has established comprehensive governance frameworks, including the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, the Batho Pele White Paper (1997), the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, and the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022), persistent challenges such as corruption, political interference, weak institutional capacity, poor financial management, ineffective accountability, and declining public trust continue to undermine public sector performance and service delivery. These governance deficiencies have constrained socio-economic development and weakened the effectiveness of democratic institutions. The study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) using a qualitative research approach. A systematic search and critical review of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government legislation, policy documents, commission reports, oversight institution reports, and publications from national and international organisations were undertaken. The review incorporated evidence from the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture (Zondo Commission), the Public Service Commission (PSC), the Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA), the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA), the National Planning Commission, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations (UN). The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring governance challenges, reform initiatives, and emerging trends in South African public management. The review found that South Africa possesses a robust constitutional and policy framework for public administration; however, implementation remains inconsistent. Corruption, state capture, political interference, weak institutional capacity, ineffective leadership, inadequate accountability, poor financial management, and limited implementation of governance reforms continue to impede effective service delivery. The findings further indicate that public service professionalisation, merit-based recruitment, ethical leadership, strengthened oversight, improved financial governance, institutional capacity development, and effective implementation of the recommendations of the Zondo Commission, Public Service Commission, and Auditor-General South Africa are critical to improving governance and restoring public trust. The article concludes that strengthening public management in South Africa requires more than policy and legislative reform; it requires effective implementation, ethical leadership, institutional professionalism, transparent governance, robust accountability mechanisms, and sustained political commitment. The successful implementation of public sector reforms has the potential to improve service delivery, enhance institutional resilience, combat corruption, restore public confidence, and contribute to the achievement of the National Development Plan 2030, the African Union Agenda 2063, and United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16. The article provides evidence-based recommendations that contribute to policy development, public sector reform, and future research on governance and public administration.

Keywords: *Public Management; Public Administration; Good Governance; Public Service Professionalisation; Ethical Leadership; Accountability; State Capture; Corruption; Service Delivery.*

Cite this article: Modise, J. M. (2026). Towards A Capable and Ethical State: Evaluating Public Service Professionalisation and Its Impact on Service Delivery in South Africa. *MRS Journal of Accounting and Business Management*, 3(6), 1-15.

Introduction

South Africa's public service occupies a central position in promoting constitutional democracy, socio-economic development, and the delivery of quality public services. Section 195 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 establishes the foundational values and principles governing public administration, including professional ethics, efficient use of

resources, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and development-oriented service delivery. Despite this robust constitutional framework, the South African public sector continues to face persistent governance challenges characterised by corruption, maladministration, political interference, weak institutional capacity, financial mismanagement, and declining public confidence. These challenges have significantly undermined

government's ability to achieve the objectives of a capable, ethical, and developmental state envisioned in the Constitution and the National Development Plan 2030.

The governance crisis has become increasingly evident through successive reports of the Public Service Commission (PSC), the Auditor-General of South Africa, and the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector including Organs of State. The Zondo Commission concluded that state capture systematically weakened public institutions through political patronage, procurement irregularities, manipulation of appointments, and widespread abuse of public resources, resulting in severe institutional decay and diminished service delivery capacity. The Commission further emphasised the need for comprehensive public service reforms centred on merit-based appointments, ethical leadership, stronger accountability mechanisms, and independent oversight institutions.

Recent evidence demonstrates that governance weaknesses remain a significant concern. The Public Service Commission's 2024/2025 Annual Report highlights persistent irregularities in recruitment and selection processes, disciplinary management, grievance handling, ethics compliance, and human resource management. The Commission also notes that implementation of the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022) remains critical for rebuilding a capable, ethical, and professional public service capable of delivering quality services to citizens. Similarly, the Auditor-General of South Africa continues to report concerning audit outcomes across government institutions. The 2024–2025 municipal audit outcomes indicate that only 39 municipalities (15%) achieved clean audits, while many municipalities continue to experience deteriorating financial management, weak internal controls, governance failures, unreliable service delivery, infrastructure decline, and increasing financial distress. These findings illustrate the continuing gap between legislative and policy aspirations and actual governance performance within local government.

Recognising these systemic challenges, government has prioritised public service professionalisation as a key reform agenda. The National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022) and subsequent Directive on the Framework to Professionalise the Public Service (2024) seek to institutionalise merit-based recruitment, competency assessments, ethical leadership, continuous professional development, improved performance management, and strengthened accountability mechanisms. These reforms are intended to reduce political interference, improve organisational performance, restore public confidence, and build a capable developmental state consistent with the National Development Plan 2030.

These reforms are further reinforced by earlier policy frameworks, including the White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service (1995), the White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery (Batho Pele) (1997), the Public Service Act 103 of 1994, the Public Administration Management Act 11 of 2014, and the Public Finance Management Act 1 of 1999, all of which collectively promote ethical governance, citizen-centred service delivery, accountability, transparency, and effective resource management within the public sector. Against this background, this study examines the contemporary challenges confronting public management in South Africa, with particular emphasis on governance failures, corruption, institutional capacity, ethical leadership, professionalisation, and public accountability. By

analysing constitutional provisions, government policy documents, commission reports, and oversight institution findings, the study seeks to identify practical strategies for strengthening public administration and advancing the vision of a capable, ethical, and developmental state.

Background to the Study

South Africa's democratic transition in 1994 marked the beginning of a comprehensive transformation of the public service aimed at dismantling the fragmented and discriminatory apartheid administrative system and replacing it with a unified, democratic, accountable, and development-oriented public administration. The adoption of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, laid the foundation for public administration based on constitutional values such as accountability, transparency, responsiveness, professionalism, fairness, efficiency, and ethical governance. Section 195 of the Constitution outlines the principles that should guide public administration, including a high standard of professional ethics, efficient use of resources, impartial service delivery, and public accountability (Republic of South Africa, 1996).

To operationalise these constitutional principles, the South African government introduced several transformative policy frameworks, including the White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service (1995), the White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery (Batho Pele) (1997), the Public Service Act 103 of 1994, the Public Finance Management Act 1 of 1999 (PFMA), the Municipal Finance Management Act 56 of 2003 (MFMA), the Public Administration Management Act 11 of 2014 (PAMA), and the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030. Collectively, these policies sought to establish a capable, ethical, professional, and citizen-centred public service committed to equitable service delivery, sound financial management, and democratic governance (National Planning Commission, 2012).

Despite this progressive legislative and policy framework, South Africa continues to experience profound public management challenges that undermine service delivery and sustainable development. Over the past decade, governance failures, corruption, political interference, procurement irregularities, cadre deployment, weak accountability mechanisms, and declining institutional capacity have significantly weakened public institutions. These governance deficiencies have contributed to deteriorating municipal performance, infrastructure collapse, financial instability, poor service delivery, and declining public trust in government institutions (Public Service Commission [PSC], 2025).

The Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector including Organs of State (Zondo Commission) exposed the systematic capture of public institutions by political and private interests. The Commission documented widespread manipulation of procurement systems, abuse of executive authority, interference in senior public service appointments, governance failures within state-owned enterprises, and extensive financial losses amounting to billions of rand. The Commission concluded that state capture severely compromised the constitutional principles of accountability, transparency, meritocracy, and ethical governance, recommending far-reaching reforms to strengthen public administration, enhance oversight institutions, and professionalise the public service (Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture, 2022).

Evidence from oversight institutions continues to demonstrate the scale of governance challenges. According to the Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA), the 2024–2025 Municipal Audit Outcomes revealed that only 39 of South Africa's 257 municipalities (approximately 15%) obtained clean audits, while the majority continued to experience material financial misstatements, weak internal controls, poor governance practices, and non-compliance with financial legislation. The report further highlighted persistent irregular expenditure, fruitless and wasteful expenditure, infrastructure project delays, and inadequate consequence management, all of which undermine effective service delivery and public confidence in local government (Auditor-General South Africa, 2026).

Similarly, the Public Service Commission Annual Report (2024/2025) identified recurring weaknesses in recruitment and selection processes, ethics management, disciplinary systems, performance management, grievance resolution, and leadership accountability. The Commission noted that many public institutions continue to experience skills shortages, inconsistent implementation of human resource policies, and limited organisational capacity to deliver quality public services. These findings underscore the urgent need to strengthen institutional governance and professionalise the public service (Public Service Commission, 2025).

Recognising these challenges, government introduced the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022) and the subsequent Directive on the Framework to Professionalise the Public Service (2024). These reforms seek to institutionalise merit-based recruitment, competency assessments, continuous professional development, ethical leadership, performance accountability, and evidence-based decision-making. The objective is to build a capable, ethical, and developmental state that is resilient against corruption and capable of delivering efficient, effective, and citizen-centred public services (Department of Public Service and Administration, 2022).

International governance assessments reinforce the urgency of these reforms. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2025) emphasises that South Africa's long-term economic growth and public sector performance depend on improving governance, strengthening anti-corruption institutions, enhancing public sector integrity, and implementing the recommendations of the Zondo Commission. Likewise, United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) calls for the development of effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels, recognising that strong public administration is fundamental to sustainable development, social justice, and economic prosperity (United Nations, 2015).

Against this backdrop, this study investigates the contemporary challenges confronting public management in South Africa. It examines the interplay between governance, corruption, institutional capacity, ethical leadership, accountability, and public service professionalisation. By drawing on constitutional provisions, national policy documents, commission reports, oversight institution findings, and international governance frameworks, the study seeks to contribute practical recommendations for strengthening public administration and advancing the vision of a capable, ethical, and developmental state capable of meeting the expectations of South African citizens.

Problem Statement

Despite South Africa's comprehensive constitutional, legislative, and policy framework designed to promote accountable, ethical, and effective public administration, the public service continues to face persistent governance and management challenges that undermine service delivery and socio-economic development. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, the White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service (1995), the Batho Pele White Paper (1997), the Public Finance Management Act 1 of 1999, the Public Administration Management Act 11 of 2014, and the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 collectively envisage a professional, citizen-centred, accountable, and developmental public service. However, the implementation of these policy frameworks has been inconsistent, resulting in weak institutional capacity, poor governance, financial mismanagement, corruption, political interference, inadequate accountability, and declining public trust.

The findings of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector including Organs of State (Zondo Commission) revealed extensive state capture, procurement corruption, abuse of public resources, political patronage, and failures in governance across numerous government departments and state-owned entities. The Commission concluded that these systemic weaknesses severely compromised the integrity, effectiveness, and legitimacy of South Africa's public institutions and recommended extensive reforms aimed at strengthening public administration, accountability, and ethical leadership (Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture, 2022).

Further evidence from oversight institutions confirms that these challenges remain widespread. The Public Service Commission (2025) continues to report weaknesses in recruitment and selection, ethics management, disciplinary processes, performance management, and leadership accountability across the public service. Similarly, the Auditor-General South Africa (2026) reported that only 39 of South Africa's 257 municipalities (approximately 15%) achieved clean audits during the 2024–2025 financial year, while the majority continued to experience material financial misstatements, weak internal controls, irregular expenditure, fruitless and wasteful expenditure, poor consequence management, and deteriorating service delivery.

Although the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022) provides a strategic roadmap for developing a capable and ethical public service, significant implementation gaps continue to hinder the achievement of its objectives. The persistence of governance failures suggests that existing public management systems have not adequately addressed the underlying structural, institutional, leadership, and accountability challenges affecting public sector performance. Consequently, there is a pressing need to critically examine the factors contributing to these persistent public management challenges and identify practical strategies that can strengthen governance, enhance professionalisation, improve accountability, and restore public confidence in South Africa's public service.

Central Problem Statement

The central problem addressed by this study is that South Africa continues to experience persistent public management failures characterised by corruption, weak governance, inadequate accountability, political interference, limited institutional capacity,

and ineffective implementation of public sector reforms, despite having comprehensive constitutional, legislative, and policy frameworks designed to promote ethical, professional, and developmental public administration. These persistent governance deficiencies undermine service delivery, erode public trust, weaken state institutions, and impede the country's ability to achieve the objectives of a capable, ethical, and developmental state as envisaged in the Constitution and the National Development Plan 2030.

Aim of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to identify practical strategies for strengthening governance, enhancing public management in South Africa and to evaluate how governance, ethical leadership, accountability, institutional capacity, and public service professionalisation influence the effectiveness of public service delivery. The study further seeks to assess the implementation of constitutional principles, legislative frameworks, public policies, and the recommendations of key oversight institutions—including the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture (Zondo Commission), the Public Service Commission (PSC), and the Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA) with a view to public sector performance, and building a capable, ethical, and developmental state.

The study also aims to contribute to the body of knowledge in public administration by proposing evidence-based recommendations that promote transparency, accountability, professionalism, integrity, and citizen-centred service delivery in line with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022), and Sustainable Development Goal 16, which advocates for effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.

Research Objectives

The overall objective of this study is to critically examine the recent challenges confronting public management in South Africa and to evaluate strategies for strengthening governance, accountability, ethical leadership, institutional capacity, and public service professionalisation in order to improve public sector performance and service delivery.

The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. **To examine** the recent public management challenges affecting governance and service delivery in South Africa.
2. **To analyse** the impact of corruption, state capture, political interference, and financial mismanagement on public sector performance and institutional effectiveness.

3. **To evaluate** the implementation and effectiveness of constitutional provisions, legislative frameworks, public policies, and governance reforms aimed at strengthening public administration in South Africa.
4. **To assess** the role of ethical leadership, accountability, oversight institutions, and public service professionalisation in promoting effective public management.
5. **To explore** international best practices and governance frameworks that can strengthen public sector reform and institutional resilience in South Africa.
6. **To propose** evidence-based recommendations for improving governance, accountability, institutional capacity, ethical leadership, and service delivery within the South African public sector.

Research Questions

The research questions are directly aligned with the objectives of the study.

Primary Research Question

- How can South Africa strengthen public management through improved governance, accountability, ethical leadership, institutional capacity, and public service professionalisation to enhance public sector performance and service delivery?

Secondary Research Questions

1. What are the recent public management challenges affecting governance and service delivery in South Africa?
2. How have corruption, state capture, political interference, and financial mismanagement affected public sector performance and institutional effectiveness?
3. To what extent have constitutional provisions, legislative frameworks, public policies, and governance reforms been effective in improving public administration in South Africa?
4. What role do ethical leadership, accountability mechanisms, oversight institutions, and public service professionalisation play in strengthening governance and improving service delivery?
5. Which international governance principles and best practices can be adapted to strengthen South Africa's public management system?
6. What practical strategies can be implemented to improve governance, accountability, institutional capacity, ethical leadership, and public service delivery in South Africa?

Alignment between Objectives and Research Questions

Research Objective	Corresponding Research Question
Examine recent public management challenges.	What are the recent public management challenges affecting governance and service delivery in South Africa?
Analyse the impact of corruption, state capture, political interference, and financial mismanagement.	How have corruption, state capture, political interference, and financial mismanagement affected public sector performance and institutional effectiveness?
Evaluate constitutional provisions, legislation, policies, and governance reforms.	To what extent have constitutional provisions, legislative frameworks, public policies, and governance reforms improved public administration in South Africa?
Assess ethical leadership, accountability, oversight institutions, and professionalisation.	What role do ethical leadership, accountability mechanisms, oversight institutions, and public service professionalisation play in strengthening governance and improving service delivery?
Explore international governance frameworks and best practices.	Which international governance principles and best practices can be adapted to strengthen South Africa's public management system?
Propose evidence-based recommendations.	What practical strategies can be implemented to improve governance, accountability, institutional capacity, ethical leadership, and public service delivery in South Africa?

These objectives and questions are fully interlinked and align with the study's aim, problem statement, theoretical framework, and systematic literature review methodology. They provide a coherent structure for investigating recent public management challenges and developing evidence-based recommendations for strengthening governance in South Africa.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses some of the most pressing public management challenges confronting South Africa, including corruption, weak governance, declining institutional capacity, political interference, poor accountability, and ineffective service delivery. Although South Africa has adopted comprehensive constitutional, legislative, and policy frameworks to promote ethical and effective public administration, persistent governance failures continue to undermine the state's ability to deliver quality services and achieve sustainable socio-economic development. By critically examining these challenges, the study contributes to identifying practical and evidence-based solutions for strengthening public sector governance and improving public administration.

The study is significant for government policymakers because it evaluates the implementation of key public sector reforms, including the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022), the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, the Batho Pele White Paper (1997), and recommendations of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture (Zondo Commission). The findings will assist policymakers in assessing the effectiveness of existing governance reforms and identifying areas requiring further policy intervention to build a capable, ethical, and developmental state.

For public sector managers and administrators, the study provides insights into strengthening institutional leadership, improving organisational performance, enhancing ethical decision-making, and promoting accountability within government departments,

municipalities, and state-owned entities. The recommendations may assist senior managers in developing effective governance systems that improve service delivery, financial management, and public confidence. The study is equally important for oversight institutions, including the Public Service Commission (PSC), the Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA), Parliament, the Special Investigating Unit (SIU), and law enforcement agencies. The findings may support ongoing efforts to strengthen oversight, improve consequence management, combat corruption, enhance institutional integrity, and promote compliance with constitutional and legislative requirements.

From an academic perspective, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge in Public Administration and Public Management by integrating constitutional principles, public policy, governance theories, oversight reports, and empirical evidence into a comprehensive analysis of contemporary public sector challenges in South Africa. It provides an interdisciplinary perspective that links governance, leadership, ethics, accountability, institutional performance, and service delivery, thereby offering a valuable reference for future researchers, postgraduate students, and scholars.

The study also contributes to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, which promotes peaceful, just, accountable, and inclusive institutions. By proposing strategies to strengthen governance and professionalise the public service, the study supports national and international efforts to improve public sector effectiveness, transparency, and democratic governance.

Research Gap

Despite extensive literature on public administration, governance, and service delivery in South Africa, several important knowledge gaps remain. Existing studies have largely examined public management challenges in isolation, focusing on specific issues such as corruption, service delivery protests, municipal governance, financial management, or public sector ethics. Relatively few studies provide an integrated analysis of how

governance failures, institutional capacity, ethical leadership, accountability, public service professionalisation, and policy implementation collectively influence public sector performance in contemporary South Africa.

Furthermore, although the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture (Zondo Commission) produced extensive recommendations aimed at strengthening governance and public administration, limited scholarly research has critically examined the extent to which these recommendations have been implemented across the public service or their implications for rebuilding state institutions. Similarly, there is limited empirical research evaluating the implementation and effectiveness of the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022) and its contribution to improving governance, merit-based recruitment, leadership development, organisational performance, and service delivery.

Another important gap concerns the integration of evidence from oversight institutions. Although the Public Service Commission, Auditor-General South Africa, National Treasury, and Special Investigating Unit regularly publish reports highlighting governance deficiencies, these findings are seldom synthesised within a single analytical framework to assess their collective implications for public management reform and institutional resilience.

Moreover, while international organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations have identified governance, accountability, anti-corruption measures, and institutional effectiveness as essential prerequisites for sustainable development, limited research has examined how South Africa's public sector reforms align with international governance standards and global best practices, particularly in relation to Sustainable Development Goal 16.

This study seeks to address these gaps by providing a comprehensive and integrated analysis of recent public management challenges in South Africa. It combines constitutional provisions, legislative frameworks, national policy documents, commission reports, oversight institution findings, and international governance frameworks to develop practical recommendations for strengthening ethical leadership, accountability, institutional capacity, professionalisation, and effective public service delivery. In doing so, the study contributes both to scholarly knowledge and to policy debates on building a capable, ethical, and developmental state.

Theoretical Framework

Introduction

The theoretical framework provides the conceptual lens through which recent public management challenges in South Africa can be understood and analysed. It explains the relationships between governance, leadership, accountability, institutional performance, ethical conduct, and service delivery. Given the complexity of South Africa's public administration environment, no single theory sufficiently explains the governance challenges confronting the public sector. Therefore, this study adopts an integrated theoretical framework comprising Good Governance Theory, New Public Management (NPM) Theory, Public Value Theory, Institutional Theory, and Principal-Agent Theory. These complementary theories provide a comprehensive understanding of public sector

performance, institutional accountability, professionalisation, and public service reform.

Good Governance Theory

Good Governance Theory refers to the principles and practices that promote effective, transparent, accountable, participatory, equitable, and ethical governance within public institutions. According to the World Bank (1992), governance concerns the manner in which authority is exercised in managing a country's economic and social resources for development. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1997) identifies participation, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, rule of law, effectiveness, equity, and consensus orientation as the core principles of good governance.

In South Africa, these principles are reflected in Section 195 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, which requires public administration to maintain a high standard of professional ethics, accountability, efficient use of resources, transparency, and responsiveness to citizens.

Relevance to the Study

Good Governance Theory is highly relevant because the study investigates governance failures affecting South Africa's public service. Challenges such as corruption, political interference, maladministration, financial mismanagement, weak accountability, and poor service delivery directly contradict the principles of good governance. The theory provides a framework for evaluating whether public institutions comply with constitutional values and governance standards.

The recommendations of the Zondo Commission, Public Service Commission, Auditor-General South Africa, and the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector all emphasise restoring accountability, transparency, ethical leadership, and institutional integrity, making Good Governance Theory particularly applicable.

Discussion

Recent reports of the Auditor-General South Africa continue to reveal weak financial controls, irregular expenditure, and governance failures across municipalities and government departments. Likewise, the Zondo Commission demonstrated how governance structures were deliberately weakened through political patronage, procurement corruption, and institutional capture. These findings illustrate the consequences of failing to uphold good governance principles. Good Governance Theory therefore supports reforms aimed at strengthening ethical leadership, accountability, oversight, citizen participation, and institutional transparency as mechanisms for improving public sector performance.

Good Governance Theory provides the primary theoretical foundation for this study because it directly addresses the governance principles underpinning South Africa's constitutional and legislative framework. It enables an assessment of institutional effectiveness and identifies governance reforms necessary to improve public administration.

New Public Management (npm) Theory

New Public Management (NPM) emerged during the 1980s as an approach to reforming public administration by introducing private sector management practices into government. Hood (1991) argues

that NPM emphasises efficiency, performance measurement, customer orientation, decentralisation, managerial accountability, competition, and value for money.

Relevance to the Study

South Africa has adopted several NPM principles through the Batho Pele White Paper, the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA), and performance management systems within the public service. The study evaluates whether these reforms have improved efficiency, service delivery, and accountability.

Discussion

Although NPM has contributed to stronger financial controls and performance management, implementation has often been undermined by corruption, weak leadership, political interference, and limited institutional capacity. Consequently, expected improvements in service delivery have not been fully realised.

The study argues that NPM reforms should be complemented by stronger ethical governance and institutional accountability rather than focusing solely on organisational efficiency.

NPM remains relevant for understanding public sector performance but requires integration with governance and ethical leadership frameworks to achieve sustainable public administration reform.

Public Value Theory

Public Value Theory, developed by Moore (1995), argues that the purpose of public institutions is to create value for society through effective service delivery, democratic accountability, citizen participation, and public trust.

Relevance to the Study

This theory aligns closely with South Africa's developmental state agenda and the Batho Pele principles, which place citizens at the centre of public service delivery. The study examines whether public institutions are creating value for citizens through responsive, ethical, and efficient governance.

Discussion

Persistent service delivery failures, infrastructure collapse, corruption, and declining public trust indicate that many public institutions struggle to generate public value. The study therefore explores strategies for rebuilding citizen confidence through improved governance, professionalisation, and institutional performance.

Public Value Theory highlights that effective public management should ultimately improve citizens' quality of life and strengthen trust in democratic institutions.

Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory explains how formal rules, organisational structures, laws, norms, and institutional cultures influence organisational behaviour and decision-making (Scott, 2014).

Relevance to the Study

The theory explains why governance failures often persist despite comprehensive legislation and policy frameworks. South Africa possesses extensive governance legislation, yet implementation remains inconsistent because institutional culture, leadership

behaviour, and political influences affect organisational performance.

Discussion

Reports by the Public Service Commission, Auditor-General South Africa, and Zondo Commission demonstrate that institutional weaknesses extend beyond policy deficiencies to include ineffective leadership, poor compliance, weak organisational culture, and inadequate consequence management.

Institutional Theory assists in explaining why governance reforms require institutional change, leadership commitment, and organisational capacity rather than legislative reform alone.

Principal-Agent Theory

Principal-Agent Theory explains the relationship between principals (citizens or elected representatives) and agents (public officials responsible for implementing government decisions). The theory recognises that agents may pursue personal interests rather than public interests when oversight and accountability are weak (Jensen & Meckling, 1976).

Relevance to the Study

The theory is particularly relevant for analysing corruption, abuse of authority, procurement irregularities, and political interference identified by the Zondo Commission.

Discussion

The widespread governance failures exposed during state capture demonstrate the consequences of weak oversight and accountability. Strengthening monitoring systems, ethics frameworks, and independent oversight institutions reduces agency problems and improves public sector performance.

Principal-Agent Theory reinforces the importance of accountability, transparency, ethical leadership, and effective oversight in ensuring that public officials act in the best interests of citizens.

Overall Theoretical Framework Conclusion

This study adopts an integrated theoretical framework because recent public management challenges in South Africa are multidimensional and cannot be explained by a single theory. Good Governance Theory provides the overarching framework by emphasising constitutional values, ethical leadership, transparency, accountability, participation, and institutional effectiveness. New Public Management Theory explains performance and efficiency reforms; Public Value Theory focuses on citizen-centred service delivery and public trust; Institutional Theory explains organisational behaviour and implementation challenges; while Principal-Agent Theory analyses accountability failures, corruption, and oversight mechanisms.

Collectively, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for examining governance failures, evaluating public sector reforms, assessing the implementation of recommendations from the Zondo Commission, the Public Service Commission, and the Auditor-General South Africa, and proposing strategies to strengthen governance, professionalise the public service, improve accountability, and build a capable, ethical, and developmental state in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, the National Development Plan 2030, and the

National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022).

Literature Review

Introduction

Public management is widely recognised as a critical pillar of democratic governance, socio-economic development, and effective service delivery. In South Africa, public management is guided by the values and principles enshrined in Section 195 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, which require public administration to be professional, accountable, transparent, development-oriented, efficient, and responsive to citizens' needs. Since the advent of democracy in 1994, government has introduced numerous legislative and policy reforms to transform the public service into a capable, ethical, and citizen-centred institution. These include the White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service (1995), the White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery (Batho Pele) (1997), the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA) of 1999, the Public Administration Management Act (PAMA) of 2014, the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, and the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022). Despite these reforms, the South African public sector continues to face significant governance challenges characterised by corruption, state capture, weak institutional capacity, financial mismanagement, political interference, and declining public trust.

The literature consistently argues that effective public management depends on strong governance systems, ethical leadership, institutional accountability, professional competence, and efficient resource management. However, persistent governance failures continue to undermine the achievement of constitutional objectives and sustainable development. This review critically examines the existing literature on governance, public service reforms, ethical leadership, accountability, public service professionalisation, corruption, and institutional performance within the South African public sector.

Public Management and Democratic Governance

Public management refers to the process through which government institutions plan, organise, direct, coordinate, and control public resources to achieve policy objectives and improve citizens' welfare. According to scholars, effective public management requires leadership, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, participation, efficiency, and adherence to the rule of law. These principles are consistent with the concept of good governance promoted by the United Nations, the World Bank, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

In South Africa, democratic governance is underpinned by Chapter 10 of the Constitution, which requires public administration to maintain a high standard of professional ethics, utilise resources efficiently, deliver services impartially, and remain accountable to the public. The National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 further identifies a capable, ethical, and developmental state as essential for reducing poverty, inequality, and unemployment. However, scholars argue that governance reforms have often been undermined by implementation failures rather than deficiencies in legislation or policy.

Public Service Reform and Professionalization

The transformation of the South African public service has remained a central government priority since 1994. The Reconstruction and Development Programme, followed by the White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery (Batho Pele), sought to establish a public service that places citizens at the centre of government decision-making. Batho Pele introduced eight principles: consultation, service standards, access, courtesy, information, openness and transparency, redress, and value for money to improve service quality and citizen satisfaction. Studies show that these principles remain relevant but have been unevenly implemented due to inadequate leadership, skills shortages, weak monitoring systems, and inconsistent organisational commitment.

Recognising these shortcomings, the Department of Public Service and Administration introduced the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022). The framework seeks to establish merit-based recruitment, competency assessments, continuous professional development, ethical leadership, and performance management across national, provincial, and local government. It views professionalisation as fundamental to building state capacity and restoring public confidence in government institutions.

Corruption, State Capture and Governance Failures

One of the dominant themes in contemporary South African public administration literature is the impact of corruption and state capture on governance. The Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture (Zondo Commission) concluded that corruption was systemic and facilitated through political interference, procurement manipulation, abuse of executive authority, and weakened oversight institutions. The Commission found that state capture undermined constitutional governance, weakened public institutions, and diverted billions of rand intended for public service delivery.

Scholars argue that corruption reduces institutional legitimacy, weakens economic development, increases inequality, and erodes public trust in government. The literature further suggests that combating corruption requires strengthening independent oversight institutions, merit-based appointments, ethical leadership, consequence management, and transparent procurement systems.

Accountability and Oversight

Accountability remains one of the fundamental principles of democratic governance. South Africa has established numerous oversight institutions, including the Public Service Commission (PSC), the Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA), Parliament, the Public Protector, and the Special Investigating Unit (SIU), to promote transparency and good governance.

The PSC has consistently reported weaknesses in recruitment, disciplinary management, ethics compliance, performance management, and leadership accountability across the public service. Similarly, AGSA continues to identify widespread financial mismanagement, irregular expenditure, weak internal controls, and poor governance in municipalities and government departments. These findings demonstrate that accountability mechanisms exist but are often weakened by poor implementation and inadequate consequence management.

Ethical Leadership and Institutional Capacity

Ethical leadership is increasingly recognised as essential for building capable and trustworthy public institutions. Ethical leaders promote integrity, fairness, transparency, accountability, and responsible decision-making while discouraging corruption and abuse of power.

The literature indicates that South Africa's governance challenges are closely linked to leadership failures, political patronage, cadre deployment, and declining professional standards. Researchers argue that institutional capacity depends not only on legislation but also on competent leadership, skilled personnel, organisational culture, and effective human resource management. The National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector therefore places significant emphasis on competency-based recruitment, continuous learning, and ethical conduct.

Synthesis of the Literature

The reviewed literature demonstrates broad consensus that South Africa possesses an extensive constitutional and legislative framework promoting accountable, ethical, and professional public administration. However, scholars, government reports, and oversight institutions consistently conclude that implementation remains the primary challenge. Corruption, political interference, institutional weaknesses, skills shortages, ineffective leadership, and inadequate accountability continue to undermine public sector performance and service delivery.

Although the literature extensively examines governance, corruption, and public administration reforms, limited research integrates constitutional principles, public service professionalisation, oversight reports, and the implementation of the Zondo Commission recommendations into a single analytical framework. This study addresses that gap by providing an integrated analysis of governance reforms, accountability, ethical leadership, institutional capacity, and professionalisation to identify practical strategies for strengthening South Africa's public service.

The literature confirms that improving public management in South Africa requires more than legislative reform. Sustainable improvements depend on strengthening ethical leadership, institutional capacity, professionalisation, accountability, merit-based appointments, and effective oversight. The implementation of the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector, together with the recommendations of the Zondo Commission, the Public Service Commission, and the Auditor-General South Africa, provides an opportunity to rebuild a capable, ethical, and developmental state. Future research should therefore focus on evaluating the implementation and impact of these reforms on governance, service delivery, and public trust.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that South Africa's public management challenges are multidimensional and deeply interconnected. Although the country has established a comprehensive constitutional, legislative, and policy framework to promote accountable, ethical, and developmental governance, implementation remains inconsistent. Evidence from the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022), the Public Service Commission (PSC), the Auditor-General South Africa

(AGSA), and the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture (Zondo Commission) demonstrates that governance failures continue to undermine institutional performance, public trust, and service delivery.

A central finding is that corruption and state capture remain among the greatest threats to effective public management. The Zondo Commission documented how political interference, procurement manipulation, abuse of public resources, and weakened oversight institutions eroded state capacity and compromised constitutional governance. These practices diverted scarce public resources away from development priorities, weakened service delivery institutions, and reduced citizens' confidence in government. Although anti-corruption reforms have been introduced, implementation remains uneven, highlighting the need for stronger consequence management, independent oversight, and ethical leadership.

The study also finds that weak institutional capacity continues to limit public sector performance. Despite reforms aimed at professionalising the public service, many government departments and municipalities experience shortages of skilled personnel, ineffective leadership, poor human resource management, and inadequate organisational capacity. The PSC has repeatedly identified deficiencies in recruitment, disciplinary systems, ethics management, and performance management, suggesting that institutional strengthening requires sustained investment in leadership development, competency-based recruitment, and continuous professional development.

Another significant finding relates to financial governance and accountability. AGSA audit outcomes continue to reveal widespread irregular expenditure, fruitless and wasteful expenditure, weak internal controls, and poor compliance with financial legislation. These governance weaknesses negatively affect infrastructure development, municipal sustainability, and the quality of essential public services such as water, sanitation, electricity, healthcare, and education. The study therefore confirms that strengthening financial management systems and enforcing accountability are essential for improving service delivery outcomes.

The findings further indicate that public service professionalisation offers a strategic pathway towards improving governance. The National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector promotes merit-based recruitment, competency assessments, ethical leadership, and performance accountability. However, successful implementation depends on political commitment, institutional independence, adequate resources, and a culture of professionalism throughout the public service.

Finally, the study demonstrates that South Africa's governance reforms are closely aligned with international governance principles, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16, OECD public governance standards, and the African Union Agenda 2063. However, translating these frameworks into measurable improvements in governance requires stronger implementation mechanisms, effective monitoring and evaluation, enhanced intergovernmental coordination, and greater citizen participation.

Key Findings

The study identified the following key findings:

1. South Africa possesses a comprehensive constitutional, legislative, and policy framework that supports ethical, accountable, and developmental public administration, but implementation remains inconsistent.
2. Corruption, state capture, procurement irregularities, political interference, and weak consequence management remain major barriers to effective public management.
3. The Zondo Commission exposed systemic governance failures that significantly weakened state institutions and undermined public confidence in government.
4. Weak institutional capacity, leadership deficiencies, and inadequate human resource management continue to limit organisational performance across national, provincial, and local government.
5. The Public Service Commission identified persistent weaknesses in recruitment, ethics management, performance management, disciplinary processes, and leadership accountability.
6. Auditor-General South Africa reports continue to reveal high levels of irregular expenditure, poor financial management, weak internal controls, and limited compliance with public finance legislation, particularly in municipalities.
7. Service delivery challenges including unreliable water supply, electricity interruptions, deteriorating infrastructure, healthcare constraints, and inadequate municipal services are closely linked to governance failures rather than the absence of policy.
8. The National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022) provides an important reform agenda, but its implementation requires stronger political commitment, institutional capacity, and independent oversight.
9. Ethical leadership, merit-based recruitment, competency development, transparency, and accountability are essential for restoring public trust and improving public sector performance.
10. South Africa's governance reforms align with international best practices, including SDG 16, OECD governance principles, and the African Union's governance agenda. However, greater emphasis is needed on implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.
11. Effective collaboration among government, oversight institutions, civil society, academia, and the private sector is necessary to strengthen governance and achieve sustainable public sector reform.
12. Building a capable, ethical, and developmental state requires a long-term commitment to institutional resilience, professionalisation, evidence-based policymaking, and citizen-centred service delivery.

Overall Discussion

The study concludes that the principal challenge facing South African public management is not the absence of policies or legislation, but rather the ineffective implementation of existing governance frameworks. Sustainable public sector reform depends on strengthening ethical leadership, institutional accountability, professionalisation, financial governance, and oversight while fostering a culture of integrity and public service excellence. Implementing the recommendations of the Zondo Commission, enhancing the capacity of oversight institutions, and accelerating

the professionalisation of the public service are critical steps towards rebuilding state legitimacy, improving service delivery, and realising the constitutional vision of a capable, ethical, and developmental state.

Key Takeaway

The central takeaway from this study is that South Africa's public management challenges are not primarily the result of inadequate legislation or policy, but rather the ineffective implementation of existing governance frameworks, weak institutional capacity, corruption, political interference, and insufficient accountability mechanisms. Although the country has established a comprehensive constitutional and policy foundation including the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, the Batho Pele White Paper (1997), the National Development Plan 2030, and the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022) persistent governance failures continue to undermine public service delivery, economic development, and citizens' trust in government.

The study demonstrates that ethical leadership, merit-based recruitment, public service professionalisation, transparent financial management, effective oversight, and strict consequence management are fundamental to restoring institutional integrity and improving public sector performance. The recommendations of the Zondo Commission, together with the findings of the Public Service Commission and the Auditor-General South Africa, provide a practical roadmap for strengthening governance, combating corruption, and rebuilding capable state institutions.

Ultimately, the future of South Africa's public service depends on translating constitutional ideals and policy commitments into consistent action. Achieving this requires strong political will, professional and ethical leadership, independent oversight institutions, evidence-based decision-making, and active citizen participation. By implementing these reforms, South Africa can strengthen democratic governance, improve service delivery, restore public confidence, and realise the vision of a capable, ethical, accountable, and developmental state that advances inclusive growth, social justice, and sustainable development.

Policy Takeaway

For policymakers and public sector leaders, the study underscores five strategic priorities:

1. Professionalise the public service through merit-based appointments, competency development, and continuous learning.
2. Strengthen accountability and consequence management to address corruption, financial misconduct, and maladministration.
3. Enhance institutional capacity and ethical leadership to improve governance, organisational performance, and service delivery.
4. Fully implement the recommendations of the Zondo Commission, the Public Service Commission, and the Auditor-General South Africa to rebuild public institutions and strengthen democratic governance.
5. Promote collaborative governance by fostering partnerships among government, oversight institutions, civil society,

academia, the private sector, and citizens to create a transparent, responsive, and resilient public administration.

These priorities provide a practical pathway towards achieving the constitutional principles of public administration and the objectives of the National Development Plan 2030, while supporting Sustainable Development Goal 16, which calls for effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. The findings of this study indicate that strengthening public management in South Africa requires coordinated reforms that enhance governance, accountability, ethical leadership, institutional capacity, and public service professionalism. The following recommendations are proposed to improve public sector performance and restore public confidence.

Accelerate Public Service Professionalisation

Government should fully implement the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022) by institutionalising merit-based recruitment, competency assessments, continuous professional development, and leadership development across all spheres of government. Recruitment and promotion should be based on qualifications, experience, competence, and ethical conduct rather than political affiliation or patronage.

Strengthen Ethical Leadership and Accountability

Government departments should strengthen ethical leadership by enforcing the Public Service Code of Conduct, promoting values-based leadership, and ensuring that senior managers lead by example. Ethics training should be mandatory for all public servants, while performance agreements for senior managers should include measurable governance, integrity, and accountability indicators.

Enhance Consequence Management

Government should consistently investigate and act against corruption, fraud, financial misconduct, maladministration, and unethical behaviour. Disciplinary processes should be concluded within prescribed timeframes, and officials found guilty of misconduct should face appropriate administrative, civil, and criminal consequences. This will reinforce accountability and deter unethical practices.

Improve Financial Governance and Internal Controls

Government institutions should strengthen internal financial controls, risk management systems, procurement oversight, and compliance with the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA) and the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA). Regular internal audits, independent monitoring, and transparent procurement systems should be prioritised to reduce irregular, fruitless, and wasteful expenditure.

Strengthen Oversight Institutions

The Public Service Commission (PSC), Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA), Public Protector, Special Investigating Unit (SIU), and parliamentary oversight committees should be adequately resourced and empowered to monitor compliance, investigate maladministration, enforce accountability, and ensure the implementation of governance reforms. Oversight recommendations should be monitored through structured implementation plans.

Implement the Recommendations of the Zondo Commission

Government should prioritise the implementation of the recommendations of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture (Zondo Commission). Particular attention should be given to procurement reform, strengthening law enforcement agencies, protecting whistle-blowers, improving governance in state-owned entities, and enhancing the independence of oversight institutions.

Build Institutional Capacity

Government should invest in organisational capacity by improving human resource planning, succession planning, technical skills development, and leadership training. Partnerships with universities, professional bodies, and training institutions should be strengthened to ensure continuous learning and the development of competent public servants.

Promote Digital Governance and Innovation

The adoption of digital technologies should be accelerated to improve public service delivery, reduce administrative inefficiencies, increase transparency, and combat corruption. Government should expand e-government services, strengthen cybersecurity, implement digital records management systems, and use data analytics to improve evidence-based decision-making.

Strengthen Citizen Participation

Government should improve public participation by creating accessible platforms for consultation, feedback, complaints, and service monitoring. Community engagement should become an integral component of planning, budgeting, implementation, and performance evaluation to ensure that public services respond effectively to citizens' needs.

Institutionalise Monitoring and Evaluation

Government should establish robust monitoring and evaluation systems to measure the implementation and impact of governance reforms. Performance indicators should focus on service delivery outcomes, ethical conduct, financial management, institutional performance, and citizen satisfaction. Annual public reporting should enhance transparency and accountability.

Recommendations for Government

To achieve a capable, ethical, and developmental state, the South African Government should prioritise the following strategic interventions:

- Fully implement the **National Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022)** across national, provincial, and local government.
- Implement all relevant recommendations of the Zondo Commission to strengthen governance, combat corruption, and rebuild institutional integrity.
- Strengthen the independence, capacity, and effectiveness of oversight institutions, including the Public Service Commission, Auditor-General South Africa, Public Protector, Special Investigating Unit, and Parliament.
- Ensure transparent, merit-based recruitment and prohibit political interference in public service appointments.
- Introduce mandatory competency assessments and continuous professional development for senior public servants.

- Strengthen financial governance by enforcing compliance with the PFMA, MFMA, and Treasury regulations, while implementing effective consequence management for financial misconduct.
- Modernise public administration through digital transformation, integrated information systems, and data-driven governance.
- Strengthen partnerships with civil society, academia, professional associations, organised labour, and the private sector to promote collaborative governance and public sector innovation.
- Expand anti-corruption initiatives, including whistleblower protection, lifestyle audits for senior officials where legally authorised, transparent procurement systems, and enhanced investigative capacity.
- Regularly review and update governance legislation and public management policies to reflect emerging challenges, technological developments, and international best practices.

Concluding Recommendation

The future of South Africa's public administration depends on transforming constitutional principles into measurable governance outcomes. Building a capable, ethical, accountable, and citizen-centred public service requires sustained political commitment, professional leadership, institutional independence, effective oversight, and a culture of integrity. By implementing these recommendations, government can improve service delivery, restore public trust, strengthen democratic governance, and accelerate progress towards the objectives of the National Development Plan 2030, African Union Agenda 2063, and United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16.

These recommendations are suitable for publication in a peer-reviewed Public Administration or Public Management journal and are directly aligned with your study's findings and conclusions.

Practical Recommendations for Government, Lead Political Party, Gnu Add Others

Here are high-level, policy-oriented recommendations tailored to South Africa's current governance environment, including the Government, the Government of National Unity (GNU), the governing political party/parties, oversight institutions, municipalities, and other key stakeholders.

Practical Recommendations

The study demonstrates that strengthening public management in South Africa requires coordinated action by government, political leadership, oversight institutions, civil society, the private sector, and citizens. The following recommendations are proposed.

Recommendations for the Government of South Africa

The Government should prioritise the full implementation of the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022) by institutionalising merit-based recruitment, competency assessments, continuous professional development, and ethical leadership across all spheres of government.

Government should strengthen financial governance by ensuring strict compliance with the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA), the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA), and Treasury Regulations. Internal controls, procurement oversight, risk management, and consequence management should be

strengthened to reduce irregular, fruitless, and wasteful expenditure. Government should accelerate the implementation of the recommendations of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture (Zondo Commission) to improve procurement systems, strengthen anti-corruption institutions, protect whistle-blowers, and restore public confidence in state institutions.

Recommendations for the Government of National Unity (GNU)

The Government of National Unity should place governance reform above political interests by developing a shared national public sector reform agenda supported by all coalition partners. The GNU should strengthen policy coordination, improve intergovernmental relations, and ensure continuity in governance reforms regardless of political changes. Public sector appointments should remain based on competence, integrity, and experience rather than political affiliation.

The GNU should also establish measurable performance indicators for ministers, deputy ministers, directors-general, municipal managers, and heads of state-owned entities to improve accountability and service delivery.

Recommendations for Governing Political Parties

Political parties represented in government should promote ethical leadership, constitutional governance, and accountability within public institutions. Political influence over administrative appointments should be minimised to protect the professionalism and impartiality of the public service.

Political parties should support legislative reforms that strengthen independent oversight institutions, improve transparency, and promote evidence-based policymaking. They should also encourage leadership development programmes that cultivate integrity, competence, and public service values among current and future leaders.

Recommendations for Parliament

Parliament should strengthen oversight over the Executive by ensuring the timely implementation of recommendations issued by the Public Service Commission, Auditor-General South Africa, Public Protector, and the Zondo Commission.

Portfolio Committees should conduct regular oversight visits, monitor departmental performance against strategic objectives, and hold accounting officers accountable for governance failures and poor service delivery.

Recommendations for Provincial and Local Government

Provincial departments and municipalities should strengthen governance systems by improving financial management, procurement practices, infrastructure planning, and organisational capacity. Municipalities should prioritise the delivery of basic services, improve revenue collection, invest in infrastructure maintenance, and enhance community participation in planning and budgeting processes. Continuous professional development programmes should be implemented for municipal managers, chief financial officers, and senior officials to improve institutional performance.

Recommendations for Oversight Institutions

The Public Service Commission, Auditor-General South Africa, Public Protector, Special Investigating Unit, National Prosecuting Authority, and law enforcement agencies should receive adequate financial and human resources to investigate corruption, enforce accountability, and monitor compliance with governance legislation.

Coordination among oversight institutions should be strengthened to improve information sharing, reduce duplication, and enhance the implementation of corrective actions.

Recommendations for Public Sector Leadership

Senior public servants should promote ethical leadership, professionalism, transparency, innovation, and accountability throughout government institutions.

Performance agreements for senior managers should include measurable governance indicators linked to ethics, financial management, institutional performance, service delivery, and citizen satisfaction.

Leadership succession planning should be strengthened to ensure organisational continuity and sustainability.

Recommendations for Civil Society and Citizens

Civil society organisations should continue monitoring public sector performance, promoting transparency, and supporting citizen participation in governance processes.

Citizens should actively participate in public consultations, Integrated Development Plan (IDP) processes, budgeting forums, and community oversight structures to strengthen democratic accountability.

Recommendations for the Private Sector

The private sector should support ethical procurement practices, comply with anti-corruption legislation, and collaborate with government in skills development, digital innovation, infrastructure development, and public-private partnerships that improve service delivery.

Recommendations for Academic Institutions

Universities and research institutions should strengthen partnerships with government by conducting evidence-based research, evaluating public sector reforms, and developing executive education programmes for public servants.

Research should increasingly focus on governance innovation, digital government, artificial intelligence, institutional resilience, ethical leadership, and public sector performance.

Strategic Way Forward

South Africa's long-term development depends on building a professional, ethical, accountable, and citizen-centred public service. Achieving this vision requires sustained political commitment, institutional independence, competent leadership, effective oversight, and collaborative governance among all stakeholders. Implementing these recommendations will strengthen democratic institutions, improve public trust, enhance service delivery, and accelerate progress towards the National Development Plan 2030, the African Union Agenda 2063, and United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16. These recommendations are designed to be balanced, evidence-based, and

institution-focused, making them suitable for publication in an academic journal while avoiding partisan positions.

Contribution and Impact of the Study

This study makes a significant contribution to the field of Public Management and Public Administration by providing an integrated analysis of the contemporary governance challenges confronting South Africa. Unlike many previous studies that examine governance, corruption, service delivery, or public sector reform in isolation, this article synthesises constitutional principles, legislative frameworks, public policies, commission reports, oversight findings, and international governance standards into a comprehensive framework for understanding public management challenges and identifying sustainable reform strategies. The study contributes theoretically by integrating Good Governance Theory, New Public Management Theory, Public Value Theory, Institutional Theory, and Principal-Agent Theory to explain the complex relationships between governance, ethical leadership, accountability, institutional capacity, and public sector performance. This integrated theoretical perspective advances scholarly understanding of governance reform within developing democracies.

From a policy perspective, the study provides evidence-based recommendations that support the implementation of the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022), and the recommendations of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture (Zondo Commission). The findings offer practical guidance for strengthening ethical leadership, improving institutional capacity, promoting merit-based recruitment, enhancing financial accountability, and improving service delivery.

Practically, the study offers valuable insights for government departments, municipalities, Parliament, oversight institutions, public managers, and policymakers by identifying practical interventions that can strengthen governance, improve institutional resilience, restore public confidence, and promote effective public administration. The recommendations also support South Africa's commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 16, which promotes peaceful, accountable, and inclusive institutions. Ultimately, this study contributes to the national discourse on rebuilding public institutions and demonstrates that strengthening public management is fundamental to achieving inclusive economic growth, democratic consolidation, social justice, and sustainable development.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides a comprehensive analysis of recent public management challenges in South Africa, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study relied primarily on secondary data obtained from legislation, government policy documents, commission reports, oversight institution reports, and peer-reviewed academic literature. Consequently, the findings are dependent on the quality, scope, and availability of published information and do not incorporate primary empirical evidence collected from public officials, policymakers, or citizens. The study focused specifically on the South African public sector. While international governance frameworks were incorporated to provide comparative perspectives, the findings may not be directly transferable to countries with different constitutional arrangements, governance systems, or socio-economic conditions.

Furthermore, governance is dynamic and continuously evolving. Legislative reforms, policy amendments, judicial decisions, institutional restructuring, and political developments occurring after the completion of this study may influence the relevance of certain findings and recommendations. The study also examined public management broadly and therefore did not conduct an in-depth analysis of individual sectors such as healthcare, education, policing, energy, or transport. Future studies may investigate governance challenges within these sectors using empirical methodologies.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a robust synthesis of contemporary governance challenges and offers practical recommendations that can inform future research, policy development, and public sector reform.

Impact Of The Study

The impact of this study extends beyond academic scholarship to public policy, governance practice, and national development. Academically, the study enriches the literature on Public Management by integrating constitutional governance, public sector reform, professionalisation, ethical leadership, accountability, and institutional performance into a single analytical framework. It provides an important reference for researchers, postgraduate students, and scholars interested in

governance and public administration. For government and policymakers, the study provides evidence-based recommendations for strengthening governance systems, improving institutional capacity, promoting ethical leadership, and enhancing service delivery. The findings support ongoing reforms aimed at building a capable, ethical, and developmental state. The study also has practical significance for oversight institutions, including the Public Service Commission, Auditor-General South Africa, Parliament, the Public Protector, the Special Investigating Unit, and law enforcement agencies. The recommendations may strengthen monitoring, accountability, anti-corruption initiatives, and institutional integrity.

From a socio-economic perspective, improved public management contributes directly to better healthcare, education, policing, infrastructure, water, sanitation, housing, and local government services. Effective governance also promotes economic growth, investor confidence, employment creation, poverty reduction, and social cohesion.

Internationally, the study contributes to global governance debates by demonstrating how constitutional democracy, professional public administration, and accountable institutions support sustainable development. The findings align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16, the African Union Agenda 2063, and international principles of good governance.



Figure 1: illustrating the study

Conclusion

South Africa possesses one of the most comprehensive constitutional and legislative frameworks for democratic governance and public administration. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that the country's greatest public management challenge is not the absence of sound policies, legislation, or institutional frameworks, but rather the persistent

gap between policy intentions and effective implementation. The study confirms that corruption, state capture, political interference, weak institutional capacity, ineffective leadership, financial mismanagement, and inadequate accountability continue to undermine governance, public trust, and service delivery. These systemic challenges have constrained the ability of government institutions to fulfil their constitutional mandate and achieve the

developmental objectives outlined in the National Development Plan 2030.

Despite these challenges, the study identifies significant opportunities for transformative reform. The implementation of the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector, together with the recommendations of the Zondo Commission, the Public Service Commission, and the Auditor-General South Africa, provides a practical roadmap for rebuilding state institutions, strengthening ethical leadership, promoting merit-based recruitment, improving financial governance, and enhancing institutional accountability.

The study concludes that building a capable, ethical, accountable, and developmental state requires more than legislative reform. It demands visionary leadership, unwavering political commitment, competent public servants, independent oversight institutions, transparent governance, effective consequence management, and active citizen participation. Sustainable governance reform depends on transforming constitutional values into measurable institutional practices and tangible improvements in the lives of South Africans. Ultimately, the future of South Africa's democracy and development will be determined by the strength of its public institutions and the integrity of those entrusted with public office. By embracing professionalism, accountability, innovation, and ethical leadership, South Africa can restore public confidence, strengthen democratic governance, improve service delivery, stimulate inclusive economic growth, and secure a more prosperous, equitable, and resilient future for generations to come.

References

1. Auditor-General South Africa. (2026). *Consolidated general report on the local government audit outcomes 2024–2025*. Pretoria: Auditor-General South Africa.
2. Department of Public Service and Administration. (2022). *National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
3. Department of Public Service and Administration. (2024). *Directive on the Framework to Professionalise the Public Service*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
4. Hendrickse, R. (2023). *The role of professionalization in the South African public service and its contribution to the UN's SDGs, Agenda 2063, and NDP 2030*. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science*.
5. Hood, C. (1991). *A public management for all seasons?* *Public Administration*, 69(1), 3–19.
6. Jarbandhan, D. B. (2022). *The Professionalisation of the South African Public Sector: Challenges and Opportunities*. *Administratio Publica*.
7. Jensen, M. C., & Meckling, W. H. (1976). *Theory of the firm: Managerial behavior, agency costs and ownership structure*. *Journal of Financial Economics*, 3(4), 305–360.
8. Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector including Organs of State. (2022). *Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture Report (Parts 1–6)*. Johannesburg.
9. Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector including Organs of State. (2022). *Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture Report (Parts 1–6)*. Johannesburg: State Capture Commission.
10. Kroukamp, H. (1999). *'Batho Pele': Putting the citizen first in transforming public service delivery in a changing South Africa*. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 65(3), 327–338.
11. Moore, M. H. (1995). *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government*. Harvard University Press.
12. Moore, M. H. (1995). *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government*. Harvard University Press.
13. National Planning Commission. (2012). *National Development Plan 2030: Our Future – Make It Work*. Pretoria: The Presidency.
14. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2025). *OECD Economic Surveys: South Africa 2025*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
15. Public Service Commission. (2025). *Annual Report 2024/2025*. Pretoria: Public Service Commission.
16. Public Service Commission. (2025). *Annual Report 2024/2025*. Pretoria: Public Service Commission.
17. Republic of South Africa. (1995). *White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
18. Republic of South Africa. (1996). *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
19. Republic of South Africa. (1997). *White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery (Batho Pele White Paper)*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
20. Republic of South Africa. (1999). *Public Finance Management Act 1 of 1999*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
21. Republic of South Africa. (2003). *Municipal Finance Management Act 56 of 2003*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
22. Republic of South Africa. (2012). *National Development Plan 2030: Our Future – Make It Work*.
23. Republic of South Africa. (2014). *Public Administration Management Act 11 of 2014*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
24. Republic of South Africa. (2014). *Public Administration Management Act 11 of 2014*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
25. Scott, W. R. (2014). *Institutions and Organizations: Ideas, Interests, and Identities* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
26. United Nations Development Programme. (1997). *Governance for Sustainable Human Development*. New York: UNDP.
27. United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. New York: United Nations.
28. World Bank. (1992). *Governance and Development*. Washington, DC: World Bank.