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Caring for the indigent urban population in South Africa: A case study of the eThekwini municipality

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Background: Indigent policy within the eThekwini Metropolitan municipality like every well-meaning government policy seeks to address three major challenges of poverty, lack of employment and gross disparities that pose a major threat to growth in the city. Overcoming these threefold challenges forms a core objective of consolidating and advancing developmental local governance, which aims to support poor households with the intention of uplifting their everyday living conditions. There is no desire to change the current status quo of the eThekwini municipality indigent policy, and the gap still exists in the lack of internal control systems, a consolidated approach to execution and a dedicated office to deal with the roll-out of the support.

Aim: This research investigated factors undermining the effective implementation of this indigent policy and proposed a strategic policy framework that ensures a long-term solution to the ineffective implementation of indigent policy.

Setting: The study was conducted in eThekwini Metropolitan Municipality, and respondents were employees in the following units: Electricity, Customer Services and Revenue Protection, Water Services, Finance Services, and Strategy Office.

Methods: The study adopted a qualitative data approach where a semi-structured interview was used to collect data from 11 purposively selected employees from five departments of eThekwini municipality.

Results: The findings reveal that the indigent policy in eThekwini municipality is ineffective because of poor implementation, poor maintenance of the indigent register, budget deficit and corruption.

Conclusion: The study concludes that some measures such as maintenance of indigent registers and adequate budget allocation to improve the inefficiency in the implementation of the indigent policy.

Keywords: indigent; indigent policies; poverty; inequality; free essential municipal services.

Introduction

Indigents in municipalities are the poorest of the poor among citizens classified to receive free basic amenities from the municipalities in South Africa (SA) (Ruiters 2018). Hence, indigent policies in South African municipalities are designed to support poor households that earn less than ZAR1500 per month. Despite municipalities' efforts to implement indigent strategies with government support, gaps exist in the implementation of the indigent policies. These include a strenuous registration process, lack of accountability and transparency, corruption and fraud, weak administrative capacity and poor governance structures. Statistics South Africa (2017) reported that there are places where indigent programmes have not been enforced by state and district municipalities. The report further showed that 22 municipalities failed to achieve a free distribution of sanitary pads, nine failed to provide free electricity, and in certain areas, 39 municipalities were not covered by the free solid waste collection for indigents. The eThekwini municipality is not exonerated. These gaps in eThekwini are experienced mostly in ungazetted settlements that do not have electricity, water and public health services (Mbatha & Mchunu 2016). Arguably, the backlogs encountered in the provision of indigent support in eThekwini point to the ineffective implementation of the indigent policy intended to cater for the less privileged who live in such areas. The failure to effectively implement the indigent programmes has socio-economic implications as citizens are deprived of necessities, thus contravening their rights as enshrined in the Constitution.

Unfortunately, to date, research into the implementation of indigent policies has shown that many indigent support programmes offered by local municipalities tend to focus on short-term poverty

alleviation with long-term vulnerability effects. Mbatha and Mchunu (2016) highlighted the backlogs experienced by municipalities related to indigent support programmes. Bhan (2014) further pointed to inadequate support in municipalities to ensure the indigent persons exit the indigent programme and embark on other ventures to sustain their livelihoods. Other studies such as Barofsky, Siba and Grabinsky (2016) tended to focus more on poverty alleviation in general without specifically zooming into indigent households and how they can be assisted to escape vulnerability. This study proposes a strategic policy framework to enhance effective and efficient indigent policy for eThekwini municipalities.

Drawing from the theory of basic human needs approach and the capability approach, this study proposes to investigate the implementation of eThekwini municipality's Indigent policy focussing on the delivery of essential amenities to frame the solution for holistic implementation of the indigent policy.

Subsequent to this introduction is the review of literature and conceptualisation of indigent policies in some African countries. Then the discussion introduces the theoretical framework of the Basic Human Needs Approach (BHNA) and the Capability Approach (CA) adopted for this study. Furthermore, an overview of the research methods adopted to elicit the data for this study was presented in the next section. The fourth and fifth sections present the analysis and the findings of the study, with a focus on the policy execution strategy of the eThekwini municipality Indigent policy. Finally, the last section concludes and offers recommendations for improving efficiency in the implementation of indigent policies and programmes in SA.

Urban indigency policies and their impact

Several studies conducted in the past decade have attributed urban poverty in SA to the apartheid legacy that they claim, created spatial development in favour of the white community while black townships were impoverished (Bonner & Nieftagodien 2012; Eddy 2010). While urban sprawls are a common sight in many urban areas, the government has in the past initiated micro-mechanisms to address urban poverty and housing backlogs, among others (eds. Hadjiisky, Pal & Walker 2017). Financing urban poverty through indigent policies has been a challenge in democratic SA. While legal provisions exist to support indigents, not all municipalities have the capacity to entirely redresses the past imbalances and curb poverty among many vulnerable urban households, especially in informal settlements. Owing to rural–urban migration, urban municipalities such as eThekwini are overwhelmed by an increasing number of people that pose a greater risk to the already strained resources and revenue base. The various problems facing SA include limited economic growth, high unemployment, widespread poverty and inequalities (Berrisford 2011). Rapid

urbanisation over the past two decades is an issue severely affecting many urban municipalities in SA. As a result of migration, urban metros are experiencing rapid population growth and significant loss of labour in many rural areas (Arndt, Davies & Thurlow 2018). Urbanisation and urban scarcity reveal more significant economic problems in SA, including slow economic growth, low levels of agriculture, mining and cultivation, which were some of the most competitive and intensive regions in the country (Turok & McGranahan 2013). Because of rapid urbanisation, economic development and deindustrialisation of urban metros are slow. The ability of urban areas within South African municipalities to house and hire rural emigrants has been severely reduced (Turok & Borel-Saladin 2014). From this background, the subsequent sections conceptualise urban poverty and its variables such as poverty, inequality, unemployment and vulnerability, as well as food insecurity.

Almost all African countries have introduced numerous initiatives and policies to improve the overall well-being of their population, especially the poor. Various levels of government are engaged in outcome-based planning for efficient and effective fiscal implementation to help the underprivileged by giving many means of support. The influx of resettled people to urban areas increases the pressure on local governments who are forced to endure the increasing demand for services by the people to whom they provide services. As noted by Barofsky et al. (2016), urbanisation, along with global poverty, has increased in the process of alerting policymakers to help eradicate poverty and vulnerability.

In Rwanda, the goal of indigent policies is to ensure their poor citizens are protected and are free from racial discrimination. Several constitutional rights are provided to citizens in line with indigency support to poor households (almost all African countries have introduced numerous initiatives and policies to improve the overall well-being of their population, especially the poor) (Lucci, Bhatkal & Khan 2018). Furthermore, the Constitution of Rwanda has devoted quite a number of articles to maintaining the foundations of the rights of its citizens. Rwanda's 2020 focus and plan to reduce poverty among its citizens, which form the foundation for all state policies and programmes, specify the need to ensure that there is a commitment that brings to actuation basic human rights. One of the Rwandan government's biggest priorities is the delivery of health care to its people, particularly groups that are considered weak. To date, Rwanda has witnessed progress in child health and maternal care, which is an enhancement in the delivery of general well-being services. It is clear from these assertions that indigent policies in Rwanda extend beyond the provision of essential services such as water and electricity. Thus, the government offers social protection and advocates for the preservation of human rights, which is largely influenced by the previous genocide that occurred around 1994. The provision of universal health insurance among other services

to indigents shows the marked improvements taken by the Rwandan government to curb deprivation and promote its citizens (Lucci et al. 2018).

As part of indigent policies to help alleviate poverty, the Government of Botswana introduced various policies that form part of the 'National Development Plan (NDP)'. The NDP states that reducing poverty is vital, whereas national plans ensure social justice among citizens. Government policies concentrate on three poverty alleviation channels: improved livelihoods for the vulnerable, extension of public services and social security networks. The 2003 plan on how to reduce poverty guides the policy implementation. The national strategy for poverty reduction, Netscape Portable Runtime, co-ordinately provided a policy framework to implement poverty programmes in Botswana. For instance, to provide a monitoring system, it consolidated several sectoral poverty initiatives. The strategy supported the introduction of broad-based economic growth that absorbs research and the delivery of high-quality fundamental services (Seleka, Siphambe & Ntseane 2007). The South Africa Regional Poverty Network (HIV/AIDS Regional Poverty Network, 6/2007) also maintained cost-effective social safety networks.

Furthermore, as part of indigent policies, the Botswanan attempt to reduce poverty has been based on three main areas of intervention. The first area is that of assisting entrepreneurs to enhance their productivity and therefore create employment opportunities and diversify the economy. Among these policies were schemes such as Financial Assistance Policy, Small Micro and Medium Enterprises (SMMEs) and Citizen Entrepreneurial Development Agency (CEDA). The basic route through which these schemes were to reduce poverty was through employment creation and participation of citizen entrepreneurs in business ventures. Even though successful in creating employment to some extent, Financial Assistance Programme (FAP) and SMME faced numerous problems. Some of the problems mentioned in the FAP evaluation report are abuse of the scheme, lack of effective monitoring and evaluation, fraud and the inability of some businesses to live beyond the subsidy era (Seleka et al. 2007). It can be noted that these indigent policies by the Botswanan government were crucial not only in poverty reduction but also in the economic empowerment of its citizens. The indigent policies encouraged entrepreneurship, innovation and citizen participation that are crucial towards growing the economy.

Basic human needs approach

Dissatisfaction with purely monetary measures of poverty led to the development of the basic human needs approach (BHNA). Its main foundation is a consequentialist ethic that argues that a good society is one in which all people will be able to meet their basic needs. A person is said to be poor if he or she is unable to meet his or her basic needs. According to Maslow's (1943) famous hierarchy of needs, BHNA in general

is more concerned with poverty experienced in the present than with long-run growth per se and more concerned with inequality in the distribution of benefits of growth than its absolute speed. Basic human needs approach was often couched within a discussion on the ability of societies to provide their citizens' basic needs within environmental constraints. The development of the BHNA was therefore intimately related to the development of environmental consciousness.

This study draws from the BHNA, which explains how the needs of the poor can be alleviated by the government (Fosu 2015). The history of BHNA is traced back to the 1976 International Labour Organization's World Employment Conference (Fosu 2015). According to Im and Hartley (2019), it is the mandate of the government to come up with the needs of the poor in society. This approach can be used to assess a society's development by focusing on the basic needs of an individual, such as health, food, education and housing, which are strong components under traditional aid programmes (Noakes 2017; Valadez 2018). This theory is useful in understanding poverty and inequality. Furthermore, Im and Hartley (2019) concurred that it can be used by the country's administration as a solution to the fundamental needs of the underprivileged in society. Valadez (2018) argued that it is important in assessing community development and focusing on basic human needs. Critics of the approach consider it lacking scientific rigour and to be defined by an 'objective function', which is vague and wordy (Valadez, 2018). The aforesaid contented that the approach does not have theoretical grounding that affects the validity of policy conclusions. Im and Hartley (2019) underscored that there are inherent weaknesses of this approach, such as unclear definition, quantification and measurement of basic needs, resources and necessary productive systems especially in the face of economic transitions towards a basic needs orientation.

Notwithstanding the weaknesses, the theory applies to this study as it relates to the realisation of the basic needs of citizens who are incapable of affording the services. It allows one to think through the factors and effects of implementing the indigent policy and the extent of delivery of basic needs. It places more emphasis on continuous learning, creativity and flexibility, which resonates well with newly emerging social and political conditions surrounding the concept of indigent policy.

Methodological issues
Participants

Participants for the study (n = 11) were selected purposively from five departments of eThekwini municipality, which included three deputy city managers (DCMs), two Electricity Customer Services and Revenue Protection eThekwini staff members, two Water Services staff members, two Finance – Revenue Services staff members and two Strategy Office

staff members. The choice of the sample was determined by the crucial roles these selected participants (*n* = 55) play in the execution of indigent policies to the vulnerable urban households in eThekwini municipality. For ethical reasons, pseudonym such as IR1 was used instead of the participants' identity.

Instrumentation

The tool used for collecting data for this study was a semi-structured interview guide. To elicit information from the DCMs and the staff members of Electricity Customer Services and Revenue Protection eThekwini, Water Services, Finance – Revenue Services and Strategy Office, a semi-structured interview guide was used. The interview guides were structured in line with the theme of the study for optimal effect on the data gathering process. Selected government documents and peer-reviewed journal articles were also used to support empirical findings in data analysis. In addition, the researcher utilised a face-to-face interview with the Deputy City Manager Treasury. With the consent of the participants, a voice recorder was used to record the interview conversations.

Data collection procedures

In this study, 11 in-depth interviews were conducted. One interview was conducted face-to-face because of poor Internet connections and technical issues, and the rest were done telephonically through Zoom and Microsoft Teams meetings. The first interview was conducted with the DCM Treasury, and this was a face-to-face interview before the national lockdown. However, subsequent interviews, with the rest of 10 participants in the study, were conducted telephonically via Zoom and Microsoft Teams owing to the government regulations disapproving physical contact because of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). As a means to ensuring consistency with all participants, the researcher asked a set of semi-structured and predetermined questions for direction in order to make sure that similar areas were addressed with every single interviewee. During the process of the interviews, every interviewee was given a chance to expand on or give additional information if they wished to do so. In addition, data were also collected from a secondary source. Documents were used to complement the primary data. The research thoroughly screened the documents to determine their relevancy to indigent policies in the eThekwini municipality.

Data analysis

Prior to the analysis of the qualitative data gathered, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Creswell (2014:18) stressed that content analysis is used when working with qualitative responses to open-ended questions on surveys, interviews or focus groups. Content analysis is a process of looking at data from different angles with a view to identifying clues in the data that help understand and interpret the raw data. These clues are identified or developed via a process called coding. Coding is the process of reading carefully through the transcribed data, line by line, and dividing it into meaningful analytical units. More importantly, a thematic analysis process was followed. The study generated a major theme and three sub-themes. Codes were allocated to the themes, and the themes were classified and integrated to make meaning out of them. Primarily, the focus was on providing an argument based on the analysis of data gathered from the semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, data gathered from the documents were used to support the qualitative data gathered from the participants.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Humanities and Social Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) of the University of Kwazulu-Natal (clearance no. HSSREC00001201/2020).

Findings

The policy execution strategy of the eThekwini municipality indigent policy

This study sought to investigate factors undermining the effective implementation of the indigent policy of Thekwini municipality that seeks to provide a framework for the provision of a social package of benefits to the indigent. The findings show the participants' views on the strategy concerning the execution of eThekwini municipality indigent policy to respective beneficiaries. From the responses, the following sub-themes were generated: delivery of free basic services, underprivileged and indigent support and selection of indigent beneficiaries.

Provision of free basic services

The execution of indigent policies in South African municipalities has its contestations as many issues of capacity often arise. This assertion is confirmed by Leburu (2017) who noted the inadequate provision of basic services to indigent households as detrimental to socio-economic development in many municipalities in SA. Poor residents in eThekwini are receiving free basic services in line with the established indigent policy for the municipality. The main aim is to reduce poverty and vulnerability among poor residents in communities. Describing the nature of the indigent policy and how it should ideally be implemented, the participants responded as follows:

> 'The strategy was to provide direct relief to the indigent as a method approach. The objective to provide a cost-effective solution with the least amount of administration was met. There are several concerns about the politicians who are targeting relief and are not sufficient to take care of some of the vulnerable groups, concerning child-headed households, where you have properties that are falling just above the threshold level. More concerns have always been about those who do not have an income and just lose their job and how the municipality can deal with that.' (Participant 1, male, 65 years old)

> 'Indigent Policy is designed to assist the communities lacking the necessities of life like but not restricted to, enough water, basic

sanitation, refuse removal, housing, or a supply of basic electricity. Therefore, indigent support means the applicable indigent support as determined by the Council timely and set out in the policy.' (Participant 5, male, 49 years old)

'My understanding of the indigent policy is that this is the policy which allows for the so-called underprivileged people to benefit from the municipal services particularly the basic services, it allows them to access our basic services without having to pay out of their pockets, as the city subsidizes their consumption in respect of those services. It is aligned with the government's vision to say the policies of the government must always be pro-poor.' (Participant 6, female, 54 years old)

The respondents raised several issues about the execution of indigent policy as it directs eThekwini municipality to give free basic services to deprived households. Poor people are at the centre of indigent support; hence, the municipality must ensure those who qualify do receive free basic services. A variety of perspectives were expressed about eThekwini municipality policies, their execution and the all-of-a-sudden silence of the policy committee. However, the execution of indigent policy in South African municipalities has its limitations as some accuse the government of creating too much welfare towards citizens who can work for themselves, which in turn promote dependency. Most participants demonstrated that although policies are not reviewed, they are effective, and most are implemented on drafts. A comparison of the two respondents revealed that apart from alleviating poverty, the indigent policy for eThekwini also targets child-headed households, which are mainly poor households headed by the eldest child in the family. This response raises questions regarding execution of the indigent policy in eThekwini because the respondents above show doubts regarding indigent support beneficiaries. Of significance, however, the above respondents consented to the fact that the indigent policy is meant to assist the poor and vulnerable acquire free basic services. The efforts by eThekwini municipality in this regard are crucial as relief support helps the poorest in communities. Together these results provide important insights into policy evaluation.

Underprivileged and indigent support

Govender & Reddy (2014) stipulated the need to reduce poverty and promote the development of rural and urban economies. In that sense, indigent support programmes are part of the broader government plan to decrease deprivation and vulnerability among the most underprivileged groups of people in communities. The study sought to investigate factors undermining the effective implementation of indigent policy. In the interviews conducted, one of the respondents highlighted the following:

'Our Indigent policy currently is premised on a package of free basic services and it is targeting the indigents. We offer indigents households free basic electricity amount to 150 kWh. Also, we give indigent households free solid waste collection as part of ensuring good sanitation in their communities. These efforts are meant to help the poor households that cannot afford these basic services.' (Participant 2, male, 47 years old)

This response might have been prompted by the need to explain how the free basic services are rendered to communities in eThekwini municipality. As noted from the responses, indigent programmes target the poorest in communities as defined in the eThekwini indigent policy. Commenting on the same issue:

'Apart from providing free basic electricity, indigents households receive free basic water (6 kL) to properties valued at less than R250 000. Also, pensioners benefit from the indigent policy as they are no longer working and need relief support.' (Participant 1, male, 65 years old)

These views show that indigent support programmes assist underprivileged communities in conditions of how strong municipality involvement is. The interviews concentrated on the clarity of the indigent policy priorities, objectives and strategies, which discuss the indigent policy material, the essence of the underprivileged and indigent help. The degree to which stakeholders agree on the indigent policy's objectives and policies, as well as the level of awareness of the policy by those in charge of applying it, was also examined. The policy is well understood by the implementers, and the eThekwini municipality encourages successful execution of the indigent policy because it is focused on strong municipality participation and distribution to crucial audiences. The social workers employed by the eThekwini municipality are university graduates with the required qualifications to understand people's social problems. Even though social workers in the eThekwini municipality have the needed qualifications to recognise people's socio-economic situations. The eThekwini municipality facilitators also understand that the recorded indigents must be reviewed every 24 months to see whether their situation has improved. The facilitators of the eThekwini municipality indigent policy also are conscious of the indigent burial provision of the policy, which maintains that families being unable to bury their family members because of a lack of financial resources are supported.

Apart from other social protection programmes that include the provision of social grants to the poor and elderly in communities in SA, participants of this study had different views regarding the execution of indigent policy. However, they came to a consensus that the policies target poverty alleviation with the view of providing social relief by giving free basic services to the citizens of eThekwini. Those underprivileged citizens who apply to receive indigent support must meet a certain criterion where they are expected to own property below R250 000. Describing some of the free basic services offered to indigents, these findings indicated a clearer understanding of the indigent policy in eThekwini municipality. The main goal is to reduce vulnerability to poverty. As a short-term help, indigent policies are implemented to assist the least poor in communities who cannot afford basic services like food, water and accommodation. It further shows that eThekwini municipality is aligning its indigent policy to government policies like the National Development Plan 2012–2030.

Selection of indigent beneficiaries

The criteria for selecting indigents across municipalities in SA have attracted criticisms from many commentators who believe that some citizens who do not deserve free services are being registered for these, thereby draining municipalities of their resources. In eThekwini, the identification of indigent households was in line with its indigent policy that also selects child-headed households. The previous policy was based on the rateable property, which specifically was based on the value of the property. The current policy that is in its early stages of execution seeks to identify and select beneficiaries based on both a property value and a means test. This study also intended to comprehend the selection of indigent beneficiaries in the eThekwini municipality. This will mean, taking into consideration, the socio-economic condition of the household. A majority of the respondents observed that:

> 'It is very difficult to ensure that everyone who applies qualifies for the free basic services programmes. My concern is that they can qualify today as you know with indigent you can be without a job today and you can find a job tomorrow, but do they come back then to relinquish FREE services that they have received. It is a problem; we see it countrywide because there are other city's indigent registers – registered but it is people that can afford it.' (Participant 10, male, 50 years old)

> 'For example, when you talk about water, we use the threshold of a property value if your property value is R250 000 and below you qualify automatically for free basic water up to 6 kL per month, but with the new policy that threshold has been extended to R500 000 but obviously, there are certain criteria you have to meet. You will not automatically qualify because your property value is under R500 000. There are other socio-economic conditions that we consider.' (Participant 8, male, 56 years old)

The respondent indicated that it is difficult to ensure that everyone who applies qualifies for the free basic services programmes. This view was echoed by another respondent who stated that there are other socio-economic conditions that the municipality considers when you apply for the indigent policy. A comparison of the two respondents revealed that the new policy can qualify households for free basic services, but there is a certain criterion that must be met. It was revealed in the view that most households in other cities' indigent registers are registered, but these people can afford the services. This response shows the uncertainty surrounding the indigent support programmes in eThekwini municipality as the selected few of those applying for the indigent programmes get the basic free services. This is because many of the indigents are able-bodied who may decide to look for employment to escape the indigent programme, but they are quick to reapply as soon as they lose their jobs. This complexity has made it difficult for eThekwini to maintain the indigent register and in the process create uncertainties.

These responses show distinct views regarding the execution of indigent policies in eThekwini. One point of significance drawn from these assertions is that the indigent relief support does not adequately sustain poor households, and hence some look for work and de-register from the programme when they get employed only to register again when they lose their jobs. Although all the respondents commonly agreed that the main aim of indigent programmes is to alleviate poverty, some felt more needs to be done in terms of empowerment because the programmes are only viable in the short run and not a panacea to end poverty and inequality.

Overall, the findings have portrayed that indigent support programmes are meant for the poorest in communities; however, their selection should be based on their poverty levels according to the indicator set in the indigent policy for the eThekwini municipality. Although indigent support programmes help to alleviate poverty in the short term, the analysis of findings has shown the need for stakeholders' intervention for long-term support programmes that will ensure that the indigents become self-sustained. In summary, these results show that there is a gap in the execution of policies in the eThekwini municipality.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate factors undermining the effective implementation of indigent policy in the eThekwini municipality. The findings of this study are in line with Berrisford (2011) that high unemployment, widespread poverty and inequalities are contributing factors to the indigent situation in SA. Other details of the results are presented as follows:

The policy execution strategy of the eThekwini municipality indigent policy

One of the aims of this study is to understand the eThekwini municipality indigent policy execution strategy. The findings of this study indicate that the execution of indigent policy in eThekwini municipality has been scattered among different departments. The interesting finding was demonstrated by a high percentage of the selected participants of the eThekwini municipal staff members who showed a wavering response by somewhat agreeing that in as much as the indigent policy in eThekwini municipality has been affected by a lot of economic and political factors, still, eThekwini continues to implement as scattered as it appears in different departments. Thus, the findings agree with that of Ramiro (2016) who stated that there are challenges in municipalities in implementing the full performance monitoring and evaluation system. This finding is also consistent with that of Ménard, Jimenez and Tropp (2018) who argued that a shortfall exists in the operation of KwaZulu-Natal municipalities as local government entities. The selection of indigents has become a challenge in that it is ambiguous to enumerate the poverty level of potential indigents. eThekwini municipality is struggling to maintain the register of indigents or indigent households.

These observations are in agreement with the system theory supported by Ramiro (2016) who submitted that the systems

theory method makes an exceptional input to planning and policy evaluation, which is believed to improve the effectiveness of service delivery and reduce human mistakes. Most theorists regard organisations as institutions that use an open-systems theory, which consists of the five elements, namely, input, activity, outputs, outcome and impact, which applies to the Government-Wide Monitoring and Evaluation System (GWME) framework. Municipalities are mandated to contribute to delivering services to the people and to ensure the impact of services provided. Asaduzzaman and Virtanen (2016) advocated that the open system theory can be used to ensure effectiveness and efficiency to assess policies and implement systems.

This study found that given the poor maintenance of the indigent register, it usually attracts nepotism and corruption in terms of the selection of indigents, and in most cases, if the poor household is not politically connected with a person of influence, that household may not benefit. The study revealed that many that were counted as part of the underprivileged population work in the informal sector, making it difficult to determine their salary range and their qualification for the indigent support programmes. Also, this makes the selection criteria a real challenge as they were more informally employed. However, it can be claimed from this study that indigent households can be determined by low income or no employment, which is associated with high levels of poverty and impoverishment. Therefore, poverty in terms of wages may be misleading as there is the likelihood that some people work in the informal sector and may earn more than the gazetted R1500 per month, which may disqualify them from receiving free basic services. Poverty remains a challenge to be addressed in the eThekwini municipality.

The findings of this study revealed that the supply of free basic services has been a challenge as a number of factors ranging from social, corruption, political and economic conditions influenced the poor policy execution and the delivery of the free basic services. The findings showed that corruption and political hegemony influenced the poor execution of the indigent policy in different municipalities in SA. The study also noted that economic disruptions sometimes also lead to insufficient resources to support the poor through the execution of the indigent policy. The study revealed that eThekwini municipality has been identifying the underprivileged offering support from water to electricity. The study also found that communities that lack life's necessities have been limited to bare minimal water, basic sanitation, refuse removal, housing and/or a supply of basic electricity. The study findings allude to the fact that sometimes locating the underprivileged among the residents is very difficult as most of the residents are informally employed. As much as the eThekwini municipality's indigents' support offer has been regarded as a good idea, its lack of coordinated execution is still a challenge. Its execution is on a different scale and different departments, leading to a scattered execution, unlike other municipalities where it is holistically implemented and in a uniform way.

The findings of this study confirmed that the lack of financial resources within local municipalities results in the sub-standard execution of indigent support programmes. However, this study partially agrees with the claims by Lloyd (2014) that indigent policies are not effectively implemented in South African municipalities because of budget deficits as other factors also contribute. Therefore, subsiding municipal services in the face of low revenue can help the execution strategies but cannot stop them from failing. In his study, Mashego (2015) concurred that the lack of financial resources within local municipalities results in poor execution of indigent support programmes. In another study, Mashamaite (2014) warned that failure by local municipalities to effectively implement indigent support programmes results in violent public protests as citizens accuse municipalities for lack of accountability. Therefore, despite the initiative of the indigent policy in the eThekwini municipality, there remains the challenge of finance and effective implementation. The absence of these two complicates a smooth flow of the execution process of the indigent policy. The poor execution of the indigent policy has also been attributed to several political and economic factors. It has been noted in the findings that the selection of indigent beneficiaries has been complicated as there have been different policies in different departments, such as sanitation, water and electricity. Hence, the selection becomes broad and is influenced by nepotism, corruption and political backgrounds. The findings depict a picture that the indigent policy is usually derailed by political corruption and injustice, especially in the formulating of the indigent register.

It can be proven from the study findings that eThekwini municipality requires a less complicated and effective execution approach to the indigent policy within the municipality and its service distribution. The findings hold the same view as Ndevu and Muller (2018) that communities blame municipalities because of the lack of accountability and transparency as citizens are excluded from municipal activities. Moreover, Indigent support policies are often decided within the municipalities without public input, which creates accountability issues on indigent support policies. Also, many inconsistencies were noted with regard to delays and insufficient budgets, among others. The study of Onyango (2020) blames such inconsistencies on the weak administrative capacity where public officials are not well trained in project management, which results in poor service provision to indigent households. Therefore, service delivery backlogs in many communities in SA lead to communities expressing their dissatisfaction in the form of public protests, which often result in the destruction of infrastructure that is meant to support service delivery. It can be acknowledged that for eThekwini municipality, a coordinated long-term approach as well as upholding accountability and transparency in the delivery of free basic services is fundamental to avoiding mistrust and community protest that derail service delivery.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings of this study show that eThekwini municipality has not yet mastered the execution of the indigent policy. The study findings are of interest to eThekwini municipality to make the execution of the indigent policy effectively implemented where it is able to determine the efficacy of the systems in place and to regulate the impact on service delivery. Also, the findings alluded to the claims that indigent policies are not effectively implemented in South African municipalities because of budget deficits. It can be concluded from the findings that holistic and long-term measures are required for an effective indigent policy programme as subsidising municipal services in the face of low revenue alone may not guarantee effective execution strategies for the programme.

This study sought to enhance the understanding of eThekwini municipality's indigent policy application strategy. The study results revealed that municipal officials in eThekwini municipality clearly understood what indigent policy entails although challenges arise when it comes to execution of the policy. There are many challenges identified in the findings related to keeping the register for indigent households because of changing circumstances where citizens escape the programme and later come back to re-register when they lose their jobs, which adversely affects the indigent register. However, the complexity encountered with regard to identifying beneficiaries as many poor households do not have proper payslips to determine their level of income as they have informal jobs. Therefore, there is a need for regular checking of indigent households to see whether they have obtained employment or not. This can be done by setting up a committee within communities that could help with collecting data and information on poor households. The need to develop and maintain an indigent register within the city that will assist in the monitoring of indigent households must be updated as circumstances change.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

B.P. conceptualised the study and was responsible for the methodology and analysis of the study. S.M. was the project supervisor in all the stages. He also did the writing and review of the manuscript.

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Data availability

Data for this study can be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, S.M.

Disclaimer

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