

Harnessing Knowledge for Good Governance: A Conceptual Framework for Transforming Municipal Service Delivery in Mpumalanga, South Africa

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Abstract

Municipal service-delivery failures in South Africa are often attributed to fiscal constraints, infrastructure deficits, skills shortages, political-administrative instability and weak accountability. However, insufficient attention has been given to municipalities' capacity to recognise, acquire, retain, share, learn from and apply knowledge. This conceptual article develops a knowledge-to-governance framework for strengthening municipal service delivery, with particular reference to Mpumalanga Province. A conceptual methodology combining an integrative literature review and theory synthesis was employed. Literature was drawn from Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, JSTOR and Google Scholar, complemented by authoritative South African sources, legislation and official statistics. The synthesis integrates knowledge management, knowledge-based, organisational learning and public governance perspectives. It proposes that knowledge creates value when leadership, culture, human resource practices, structures, digital infrastructure and resources enable effective knowledge acquisition, creation, capture, sharing, application and retention. These capabilities can strengthen organisational learning and evidence-informed decision-making, thereby improving transparency, accountability, participation, responsiveness and municipal performance. Ten propositions are advanced for empirical testing. The article contributes by shifting attention from possessing information to converting dispersed knowledge into organisational learning, accountable decisions and public value. The framework has wider relevance to local governments seeking adaptive, knowledge-driven and accountable service-delivery systems.

Keywords: *Knowledge Management; Organisational Learning; Good Governance; Municipal Service Delivery; Local Government; Mpumalanga; Knowledge Sharing; Public-Sector Performance.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Local government occupies a distinctive position in South Africa's developmental state because municipalities are simultaneously political institutions, service-delivery organisations and sites of direct citizen interaction. Chapter 7 of the Constitution requires local government to provide democratic and accountable governance, ensure sustainable service delivery, promote social and economic development, create safe and healthy environments, and encourage community involvement. The Municipal Systems Act further connects these responsibilities to participatory governance, planning, performance management, organisational change, and human resource development (Republic of South Africa, 1996, 2000). The statutory architecture, therefore, assumes that municipalities will possess and mobilise the organisational capability required to convert public resources into public value.

Yet formal mandates do not automatically produce effective performance. The Auditor-General of South Africa's 2023/24 consolidated local-government report shows that only 41 of 257 municipalities achieved clean audit outcomes, while 99 received unqualified opinions with findings, 90 received qualified opinions, and 17 had adverse or disclaimed opinions. Mpumalanga recorded two clean audits, eight unqualified opinions with findings, nine qualified opinions and one outstanding audit. More importantly for a knowledge perspective, AGSA reports that only three Mpumalanga municipalities submitted reliable financial statements and only three submitted credible performance reports; it also identifies weak financial controls, shortages of skilled personnel, ineffective performance information systems and persistent leadership accountability problems (Auditor-General South Africa [AGSA], 2025a, 2025b). These are not merely financial or technical failures. They are also failures of organisational memory, knowledge use, learning, and coordination and decision capability.

Knowledge management (KM) offers a potentially important but underdeveloped lens for understanding this problem. The central proposition of KM is not simply that organisations possess information; it is that organisations can create value when knowledge is deliberately acquired, created, captured, shared, applied and protected (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Gold et al., 2001). Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) knowledge-creation perspective further distinguishes tacit knowledge embedded in experience from explicit knowledge that can be articulated and codified. In municipalities, both forms are consequential. Formal policies, financial records, service standards, engineering reports and performance data constitute explicit knowledge, while employees' practical experience, community insights, institutional memory and knowledge of local conditions often remain tacit. A municipality that captures only documents but loses experienced personnel may therefore retain information while losing knowledge.

The South African local government scholarship has already identified the importance of KM. Gaffoor and Cloete (2010), for example, demonstrate that organisational culture, human resources, information technology, organisational structure, strategy and leadership are important enablers of KM in a municipal environment. Ncoyini and Cilliers (2020) similarly show that knowledge-transfer systems are influenced by organisational and technological conditions. SALGA's Local Government Knowledge Management Toolkit (2018) explicitly positions KM as a capacity-building mechanism for local government. More recently, Mosimege and Maasdorp (2025), in a systematic review of local-government KM literature, identify leadership, employee engagement and technology as important enablers and report positive associations between KM and service delivery, decision-making, efficiency and innovation.

However, the literature remains fragmented, limiting its explanatory and practical value for Mpumalanga. One stream treats KM primarily as a technical or information-management problem; another emphasises organisational culture and knowledge sharing; a third focuses on public-sector governance; and a fourth examines service-delivery failures through finance, leadership, political or skills lenses. Less developed is an integrated explanation of how municipal enabling conditions convert dispersed knowledge into organisational learning, how that learning informs governance processes, and how governance improvements translate into service-delivery outcomes. The present article addresses this theoretical fragmentation.

The article is conceptual rather than empirical. Its purpose is therefore not to claim that the proposed relationships have already been demonstrated in Mpumalanga municipalities. Instead, it synthesises established theoretical and empirical insights to develop a parsimonious

framework and a set of propositions that can subsequently be operationalised and tested. This approach is consistent with conceptual scholarship that treats theory-building as a legitimate form of research when it clearly identifies concepts, synthesises prior knowledge and develops new relationships or perspectives (Jaakkola, 2020; MacInnis, 2011; Torraco, 2005).

An important implication follows from this perspective: municipal knowledge is both an operational resource and a governance resource. When audit findings, citizen complaints, employee experience and performance information are disconnected from planning and decision routines, municipalities can repeatedly encounter the same problems without institutionalising what has been learned. Conversely, when knowledge is deliberately integrated, it can strengthen organisational memory, coordination and adaptive capacity. Recent public-sector scholarship increasingly treats knowledge formation as a social and institutional process rather than a technical exercise (Laihonen et al., 2024), while evidence from local-government research shows that KM remains uneven where sharing, leadership and organisational support are weak (Cajková et al., 2023; Mosimege & Maasdorp, 2025).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

South African municipalities continue to experience recurring service-delivery, governance, and accountability problems despite an extensive legal and policy framework, substantial infrastructure expenditure, and repeated capacity-building interventions. In Mpumalanga, recent audit evidence points to weak financial reporting, skills shortages, ineffective performance information systems, inadequate consequence management, and persistent weaknesses in leadership accountability (AGSA, 2025b). Existing literature identifies many of these constraints, but the role of knowledge as an organisational resource remains insufficiently integrated into explanations of municipal performance. In particular, there is limited conceptual clarity about the mechanisms by which employee knowledge, community knowledge, institutional records, and interdepartmental learning can translate into improved governance and service delivery. The problem is therefore not simply that municipalities lack knowledge. It is that knowledge may be fragmented, tacit, poorly captured, weakly shared, politically constrained, technologically inaccessible or insufficiently connected to decisions and performance routines. Without an integrated conceptual model linking KM capabilities to organisational learning, governance quality and service-delivery outcomes, KM risks remaining an isolated administrative initiative rather than a strategic capability of developmental local government.

The international significance of the problem should not be overlooked. Public organisations across different settings face employee mobility, loss of institutional memory, rapid digitalisation, fragmented information systems, and growing expectations for evidence-informed decision-making. Research on knowledge loss shows that employee turnover can create an organisational 'knowledge exodus' when tacit expertise is not deliberately retained (Serenko, 2023), while evidence from public-sector digital government research indicates that KM practices can mediate the value generated by administrative and technological capabilities (AlMulhim, 2023). The problem addressed by this article is therefore simultaneously local and general: how can public organisations convert distributed knowledge into institutional learning and accountable action?

1.2 Aim of the Article

The aim of this conceptual article is to develop an empirically testable framework explaining how knowledge-management capabilities, enabled by leadership, culture, human

resource practices, organisational structures, and digital infrastructure, can strengthen organisational learning and good governance, thereby contributing to improved municipal service delivery in Mpumalanga Province.

1.3 Objectives

The article pursues five interrelated objectives: (1) to critically synthesise literature on knowledge management, organisational learning, municipal governance and service delivery; (2) to identify the organisational and contextual conditions that enable effective KM in local government; (3) to explain the mechanisms through which KM capabilities can influence organisational learning, governance quality and municipal performance; (4) to develop a conceptual framework integrating knowledge inputs, KM enablers, KM capabilities, organisational learning, good governance and service-delivery outcomes; and (5) to formulate propositions that can be operationalised and empirically tested, particularly in Mpumalanga municipalities.

1.4 Research Questions

The article addresses five questions: What organisational conditions enable municipalities to convert dispersed knowledge into usable organisational knowledge? How do KM capabilities influence organisational learning and evidence-informed municipal decision-making? How can organisational learning and knowledge use strengthen good-governance practices? How might good governance mediate the relationship between KM capabilities and service-delivery outcomes? What propositions can be derived from the literature for empirical testing in Mpumalanga municipalities?

2. CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Knowledge Management: From Information Possession to Organisational Capability

Knowledge management has evolved from a predominantly information-systems orientation toward a broader understanding of organisational capability. Alavi and Leidner (2001) distinguish knowledge from information and frame KM as a set of processes concerned with knowledge creation, storage/retrieval, transfer and application. Davenport and Prusak (1998) similarly emphasise the social and experiential character of knowledge, cautioning against treating knowledge as a commodity that can be managed independently of people. Gold et al. (2001) advance the argument by conceptualising KM capability as the interaction between knowledge infrastructure and knowledge processes. This distinction is important for municipalities because investing in repositories, intranets, or communication platforms does not necessarily create a knowledge-capable organisation. Hislop et al. (2018) likewise emphasise that KM is a multidisciplinary organisational practice rather than a narrow information-technology function.

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) provide a complementary explanation through the interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge. Their SECI model proposes that organisational knowledge develops through socialisation, externalisation, combination and internalisation. In a municipal context, the model suggests that a frontline employee's experience of recurring water-supply failures can become organisationally useful only if it is surfaced, articulated, shared, connected with other evidence, and incorporated into routines. The model is therefore valuable because it moves attention from knowledge storage to knowledge conversion. Its limitation, however, is that it can appear overly linear when applied to public organisations in which political authority, professional boundaries, resource scarcity,

and competing interests influence which knowledge is recognised and acted upon. The framework proposed in this article, therefore, treats knowledge conversion as a socially mediated and governance-dependent capability rather than a purely sequential process. Nonaka's (1991) earlier knowledge-creation argument provides the foundation for this later formulation.

Grant's (1996) knowledge-based view strengthens this argument by treating knowledge integration as a central organisational task. Organisations do not need every employee to know everything; they need mechanisms through which specialised knowledge can be coordinated and applied to collective tasks. This insight is particularly relevant to municipalities, where finance, engineering, human resources, community development, procurement and political oversight generate different forms of expertise. Weak performance may arise not from an absolute shortage of knowledge but from an inability to integrate knowledge across professional and departmental boundaries.

These perspectives converge on an important distinction: knowledge assets are not equivalent to knowledge capability. A municipality may have skilled employees, extensive databases, policies and reports but still perform poorly if knowledge is not shared, trusted, interpreted and used. This distinction provides the first theoretical foundation for the proposed framework: municipal KM should be evaluated by its capacity to convert dispersed knowledge into coordinated action and learning, rather than by the mere existence of ICT systems or documents.

2.2 Knowledge Management in Local Government

Local government presents a particularly demanding setting for KM because knowledge is distributed across formal administration, elected structures, frontline workers, contractors, community organisations and citizens. Unlike a private firm, a municipality cannot define performance solely in terms of market outcomes. Its knowledge processes must operate within legal mandates, public accountability, political contestation and participatory governance. Hossain (2016) therefore links KM to governance because informed decisions, coordination and institutional learning are central to public-sector effectiveness.

South African evidence supports the strategic relevance of this perspective. Gaffoor and Cloete (2010) found that municipal KM depends on organisational culture, human resources, ICT, structure, strategy and leadership. Their study is significant because it challenges the assumption that KM can be implemented as a stand-alone technical intervention. Ncoyini and Cilliers (2020) similarly demonstrate that knowledge-transfer systems are shaped by organisational factors and that KM can support the accumulation and accessibility of knowledge from employees, stakeholders and beneficiaries. The SALGA toolkit (2018) translates this logic into a practical local-government framework, emphasising the need to identify what a municipality needs to know, where knowledge resides, how it can be moved, what tools are required, and how KM performance can be measured.

Yet a critical reading of this literature reveals a recurring implementation gap. Policies, toolkits and frameworks may establish what municipalities should do without explaining why implementation repeatedly stalls. The South African evidence suggests that leadership support, organisational culture, skills and infrastructure are decisive. The implication is that the problem is not a lack of KM models but a lack of organisational conditions that make knowledge processes legitimate, resourced and consequential. A municipality can therefore possess a KM policy while remaining knowledge-poor in practice if employees do not trust the system,

leaders do not use the knowledge generated, departments protect information, or performance systems reward compliance rather than learning.

Mosimege and Maasdorp's (2025) systematic review is particularly important because it consolidates international evidence from 2010 to 2024 and finds that local governments use knowledge-sharing platforms, communities of practice and training programmes, while implementation is constrained by resistance to change, resource limitations and unsupportive cultures. Strong leadership, employee engagement and technology infrastructure emerge as important enablers. The present article builds on this synthesis but extends it by proposing that these enablers should not be treated as isolated predictors of service delivery. Their effects are expected to operate through KM capabilities and organisational learning, which then influence governance quality and performance.

Comparative evidence demonstrates that this implementation challenge is not uniquely South African. Cajková et al. (2023), examining municipalities in Slovakia, found that systematic KM remained weak and that technological understandings of KM could overshadow knowledge sharing. This finding is important because it illustrates a recurring implementation problem: municipalities may acquire digital tools without creating the social and organisational routines that make knowledge useful. In the UAE public sector, Al Sayegh et al. (2023) similarly show that e-government adoption is shaped by knowledge management considerations, while AlMulhim (2023) finds that KM practices mediate the relationships among administrative management, information technology, and e-government success. South African public-sector evidence also points to the importance of KM awareness and organisational conditions (Nenungwi & Garaba, 2022). The critical lesson is that local-government KM must be embedded in organisational processes rather than treated as a technology project.

2.3 Organisational Learning as the Mechanism That Converts Knowledge into Capability

Knowledge does not improve performance merely because it exists. It must be interpreted, integrated and institutionalised. Crossan, Lane, and White (1999) conceptualise organisational learning as a multilevel process linking individual intuition, group interpretation, integration and organisational institutionalisation. This provides a useful bridge between KM and municipal performance. Employee experience represents a potential knowledge input; collective interpretation creates shared meaning; integration coordinates action; and institutionalisation embeds learning into systems, routines and procedures.

The distinction is consequential for municipalities because repeated service-delivery failures may represent not a total absence of knowledge but a failure to learn from recurring experience. If the same infrastructure problem is recorded in reports but not incorporated into planning, budgeting, procurement or maintenance routines, information has been retained without becoming organisational learning. Similarly, if community complaints are collected but not analysed and fed into planning processes, participation has generated data without creating institutional learning.

Organisational learning therefore occupies a mediating position in the proposed framework. KM provides the processes through which knowledge becomes accessible and usable; organisational learning provides the mechanism through which that knowledge changes collective understanding, routines and decisions. This position is consistent with the knowledge-based view and with learning theories that emphasise integration across individual, group and organisational levels (Grant, 1996; Crossan et al., 1999).

2.4 KM Enablers: Leadership, Culture, HRM, Structure and Technology

Leadership is arguably the most important enabling condition because municipal executives and political-administrative leaders determine whether knowledge is treated as a strategic resource or as an additional administrative burden. Gaffoor and Cloete (2010) identify strategy and leadership as central KM enablers, while Mosimege and Maasdorp (2025) find leadership commitment to be a recurring facilitator across local-government studies. Leadership affects resource allocation, incentives, psychological safety, cross-departmental collaboration and the extent to which evidence is actually used in decisions. Accordingly, leadership should be conceptualised not simply as support for a KM department but as active sponsorship of knowledge use in planning, performance review, and problem-solving.

Organisational culture is equally important. Knowledge sharing involves behavioural and relational choices. Employees may withhold knowledge when information is treated as a source of personal power, when mistakes are punished, or when organisational silos reward departmental rather than municipal performance. Conversely, cultures of trust, collaboration and reflection can make knowledge sharing routine. The literature therefore suggests that technology cannot compensate for a culture that discourages sharing. This is consistent with Gold et al. (2001), who conceptualise culture, structure and technology as elements of knowledge infrastructure rather than substitutes for knowledge processes.

Human-resource management provides another critical bridge. Recruitment, induction, training, mentoring, performance management, succession planning and exit interviews can either facilitate or undermine institutional memory. The original manuscript correctly emphasises the danger of losing tacit knowledge when experienced employees leave. The stronger conceptual position is that HRM should be treated as a knowledge-retention architecture. Municipal HR systems can identify critical knowledge holders, document expertise, create mentoring relationships, institutionalise communities of practice and incorporate knowledge-sharing behaviour into performance expectations. In this sense, KM is not solely an information function; it is also an HRD and organisational development function.

Technology is an enabling infrastructure rather than an independent source of KM value. Digital repositories, intranets, collaboration platforms, document management systems, and analytics can reduce barriers to knowledge access and transfer. However, technology only creates value when knowledge is accurate, contextualised, maintained and used. De Bem Machado et al. (2022) show that KM and digital transformation are mutually connected, but the relationship should not be interpreted in a technologically deterministic way. In municipalities with weak processes, ICT can digitise fragmentation rather than solve it.

Finally, organisational structure and resources influence whether KM can be sustained. Dedicated KM roles or units can foster ownership and accountability, but a stand-alone department is insufficient. If KM becomes detached from finance, HR, planning, infrastructure and community engagement, it risks becoming another silo. The stronger proposition is therefore a distributed governance model in which a KM function provides coordination, standards and monitoring while knowledge responsibilities are embedded throughout municipal processes.

2.5 Knowledge Management and Good Governance

Good governance provides the public-value dimension of the framework. The South African Constitution defines local government in terms of democratic and accountable governance, sustainable service delivery, and community involvement (Republic of South

Africa, 1996). The Municipal Systems Act requires mechanisms for community participation and establishes processes for planning, performance management and organisational development (Republic of South Africa, 2000). KM is therefore relevant not because it is inherently desirable but because governance depends on the availability and use of credible knowledge.

Transparency requires that relevant information can be accessed, interpreted and communicated. Accountability requires evidence about decisions, expenditure and performance. Participation requires mechanisms through which community knowledge enters planning and decision processes. Responsiveness requires institutions to detect and interpret changing needs. Effectiveness and efficiency require knowledge about what works, where resources are being wasted and which processes should be redesigned. In each case, KM can be understood as an enabling infrastructure for governance rather than as a separate managerial domain.

However, the relationship should not be romanticised. More information does not automatically create better governance. Knowledge can be selectively used, politically manipulated or ignored. Institutional power determines which forms of knowledge are treated as legitimate. Technical reports may be privileged over community experience, while political priorities may override evidence. The proposed framework, therefore, places organisational learning and governance processes between KM capabilities and service outcomes. This acknowledges that knowledge must pass through interpretation, deliberation, accountability and decision-making before it can create public value.

The governance link is also supported by contemporary evidence. Dayal (2023) argues that KM in the South African public sector can strengthen institutional learning and adaptation, while the Municipal Systems Act explicitly connects local government to participatory planning and performance management. The implication is that municipalities should ask not only 'Do we have the information?' but also 'who produces knowledge, whose knowledge counts, how is it verified, how does it enter decisions, and what happens when evidence contradicts existing practice?'

The ten propositions therefore provide a clear agenda for empirical research. Future studies should test whether leadership support, knowledge-oriented culture, HRM and ICT strengthen KM capability; whether KM improves organisational learning; whether learning improves decision quality; whether evidence-informed decisions strengthen governance; and whether governance mediates the relationship between KM and service delivery under different political, fiscal, rural and digital conditions. Ultimately, municipal KM should not be judged by how much information an organisation stores or how many digital platforms it owns. It should be judged by whether the institution learns from experience, retains critical knowledge, recognises community knowledge, makes better decisions, governs more transparently and delivers more reliably. The proposed knowledge-to-governance model provides a conceptual basis for making that shift visible, measurable and empirically testable.

The findings should nevertheless be taken seriously with appropriate conceptual caution. The article does not claim that the framework has been empirically proven in Mpumalanga, nor that KM can substitute for finance, infrastructure, political accountability or capable leadership. Rather, it identifies a plausible and testable mechanism supported by converging evidence across municipal, public-sector and organisational settings. The international relevance lies in the recurring problem of converting distributed knowledge into adaptive

public action. Evidence from Slovakia, Middle Eastern public-sector digital government, and broader organisational studies suggests that the enabling conditions and learning mechanisms identified here are not confined to one national setting (Cajková et al., 2023; AlMulhim, 2023; Al Sayegh et al., 2023; Cui, 2025). What varies across contexts is the institutional configuration and strength of the relationships.

The argument is particularly compelling in Mpumalanga. AGSA's recent audit evidence points to persistent weaknesses in performance information, skills, financial controls and leadership accountability (AGSA, 2025b). These conditions suggest that municipal recovery requires more than additional rules, infrastructure or technology. It requires institutions capable of learning from evidence, retaining scarce expertise, integrating community knowledge, sharing knowledge across organisational boundaries and converting lessons into changed practice. Serenko (2023) demonstrates why institutional memory should be treated as a strategic risk, while Mosimege and Maasdorp (2025) show that leadership, employee engagement, technology and organisational conditions repeatedly shape local-government KM effectiveness.

The framework's central contribution is the proposed knowledge-to-governance pathway. It does not assume that KM has a simple direct effect on service delivery. Instead, it proposes that enabling conditions strengthen KM capability; KM capability supports organisational learning; learning improves evidence-informed decision-making and municipal performance; and governance quality mediates the translation of these capabilities into public-facing service outcomes. This mechanism is theoretically more defensible than a direct-effect model because knowledge must be interpreted, legitimised, integrated and acted upon before it can create public value. Contemporary public-sector scholarship supports this logic by showing that knowledge formation is social and interpretive (Laihonen et al., 2024), that municipal KM can remain weak where sharing is neglected (Cajková et al., 2023), and that KM practices can mediate the value of administrative and technological capabilities (AlMulhim, 2023).

This conceptual article argues that persistent municipal service-delivery problems should be examined not only through the familiar lenses of finance, infrastructure, leadership and skills, but also through municipalities' capability to create public value from knowledge. The synthesis indicates that knowledge becomes consequential when enabling conditions allow municipalities to acquire, create, capture, share, apply and retain knowledge and when organisational learning converts that knowledge into changed routines and evidence-informed decisions.

This argument is grounded in foundational KM and organisational-learning scholarship (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Gold et al., 2001; Crossan et al., 1999) and strengthened by contemporary evidence on organisational resources, knowledge transfer and learning (Amiri et al., 2023; Hameed et al., 2025; Sancho-Zamora et al., 2022).

2.6 Knowledge Management and Municipal Service Delivery

Service delivery is the outcome domain in which the value of KM becomes visible to citizens. Knowledge can support service delivery through several pathways: identifying recurring problems, sharing successful practices, reducing duplication, strengthening technical decision-making, retaining institutional memory, improving coordination and enabling innovation. Pepple et al. (2022) emphasise knowledge acquisition, sharing and application as mechanisms through which public-sector organisations can improve performance. Sadat (2021) similarly links KM to local-government service improvement.

South African municipal studies provide more contextual evidence. Gaffoor and Cloete (2010) show that KM enablers are linked to organisational effectiveness, while Ncoyini and Cilliers (2020) demonstrate the relevance of knowledge transfer to institutional capacity and service delivery. The 2025 systematic review by Mosimege and Maasdorp further reports that effective KM is associated with decision quality, efficiency, innovation and service delivery. These findings collectively support the plausibility of a positive relationship, but they do not justify a simplistic direct-effect model.

A direct-effect model would imply that more KM automatically produces better services. Such a proposition ignores the mediating role of organisational learning and governance. A municipality can share knowledge extensively without changing decisions; it can learn without possessing resources to implement solutions; and it can have strong governance procedures without sufficient technical capacity. The conceptual model proposed here, therefore, specifies a chain of mechanisms rather than a single direct relationship. KM capabilities are expected to influence service delivery partly through learning, governance and organisational performance.

2.7 Critical Synthesis and Research Gap

Four gaps emerge from the literature. First, much KM research remains organisation-centred and gives insufficient attention to the public-value and governance dimensions of municipal knowledge.

Second, South African municipal studies identify important enablers but are often case-specific, making it difficult to explain how enabling conditions interact as a system.

Third, service-delivery literature frequently emphasises finance, leadership, corruption, infrastructure and skills while treating knowledge as an implicit rather than explicit organisational capability.

Fourth, existing frameworks do not adequately specify the mediating mechanisms through which KM becomes governance and service-delivery value.

The proposed framework responds by connecting five levels: knowledge inputs; KM enablers; KM capabilities; organisational learning and evidence-informed decision-making; and governance and service-delivery outcomes. This integration represents the article's principal conceptual contribution.

The framework is also designed to travel conceptually beyond Mpumalanga without claiming universal empirical validity. Its central mechanism—distributed knowledge requiring enabling conditions, transfer, learning and governance before it can generate public value—is relevant to public organisations facing similar challenges of digital transformation, staff mobility, fragmented expertise and citizen participation. What must be tested empirically is how strong these relationships are under different institutional, fiscal, political and technological conditions.

The resulting gap has both theoretical and practical significance. The theoretical gap concerns the missing mechanism between knowledge management and public value: existing studies identify enablers or outcomes, but fewer frameworks specify the intervening role of organisational learning and governance.

The practical gap concerns implementation: municipalities may adopt policies, repositories and digital systems without establishing the organisational conditions that make knowledge consequential.

The present framework addresses both gaps by treating knowledge inputs, enabling conditions, KM capabilities, organisational learning, governance, municipal performance and service outcomes as an interconnected system rather than as separate administrative domains.

3. CONCEPTUAL RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a conceptual research methodology based on an integrative literature review and theory synthesis. A conceptual article is appropriate when the research purpose is to clarify constructs, connect previously fragmented bodies of knowledge, identify relationships and develop a framework that can guide subsequent empirical research (Jaakkola, 2020; MacInnis, 2011).

Conceptual research is therefore not a weaker substitute for empirical research. Its value lies in disciplined synthesis and theoretical explanation. Jaakkola (2020) argues that conceptual papers require an explicit research design, justified theoretical choices and transparent analytical procedures. MacInnis (2011) similarly positions conceptualisation as a process through which existing ideas are reorganised to produce meaningful theoretical advancement.

The literature synthesis followed the logic of an integrative review rather than a purely descriptive literature review. Torraco (2005) explains that integrative reviews critically analyse and synthesise representative literature to generate new frameworks and perspectives. Whittemore and Knafl (2005) likewise argue that integrative reviews are particularly useful when diverse forms of evidence need to be brought together.

This approach is suitable for the present study because the phenomenon spans management, information systems, organisational learning, public administration, and South African local government policy. The objective was consequently not to estimate a pooled effect size but to identify recurring constructs, theoretical mechanisms, contradictions and gaps from which a coherent conceptual model could be derived.

3.1 Data Sources and Search Strategy

The literature was searched in Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected to provide coverage across management, information systems, public administration, organisational studies and interdisciplinary social science.

The database search was complemented by targeted searches of authoritative South African institutional sources, including SALGA, AGSA, Statistics South Africa, the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs and official government legislation portals. The use of institutional sources was necessary because municipal governance is strongly shaped by statutory and policy requirements that are not adequately represented in journal literature.

Search terms were combined around four conceptual clusters: i) 'knowledge management', 'knowledge sharing', 'knowledge retention', 'knowledge transfer', 'knowledge creation', 'knowledge management systems'; ii) 'local government', 'municipality', 'municipalities', 'public sector'; iii) 'good governance', 'accountability', 'transparency', 'participation', 'responsiveness', 'service delivery'; and iv) 'South Africa', 'Mpumalanga', 'local government South Africa'. Backward and forward citation searching was used to identify seminal works and influential studies that might not have been captured by contemporary keyword searches.

The inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books and book chapters, authoritative government and statutory documents, and credible institutional reports directly addressing KM, organisational learning, governance or municipal/public-sector service delivery. Seminal theoretical works were retained where necessary to establish foundational constructs.

Contemporary evidence, particularly literature published from 2015 onward, was prioritised, while older works were retained where their theoretical contribution remained foundational. Literature with substantive relevance to South Africa and local government was prioritised, with international studies included where they strengthened theoretical explanation or comparative understanding.

Sources were excluded where they had no substantive connection to the conceptual problem, were opinion pieces without an identifiable evidence base, duplicated another source, or contained bibliographic information that could not be adequately verified.

Studies focused exclusively on private-sector competitive advantage were excluded where their constructs could not reasonably be translated into public-sector governance or service-delivery processes. These criteria were intended to preserve conceptual relevance while maintaining sufficient disciplinary breadth for an integrative review.

3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

3.3 Analysis and Synthesis

The analysis proceeded through five conceptual stages: problem delimitation; literature searching; source screening; thematic extraction and critical comparison; and framework synthesis. The extracted literature was organised around the questions: What is knowledge in organisational settings? Which conditions enable knowledge processes? How is knowledge converted into organisational learning? How does learning influence governance? And through what mechanisms might governance affect service delivery? The synthesis deliberately compared convergent and divergent arguments rather than merely counting supportive studies.

The framework was developed through abductive theory synthesis: established constructs from KM and organisational learning theory were combined with public governance requirements and empirical evidence from South African local government. The resulting propositions are therefore theoretical claims derived from the literature, not empirical findings. This distinction is essential. The framework offers relationships for testing; it does not claim to have established causality in Mpumalanga municipalities.

4. PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed framework, presented in Figure 1, conceptualises municipal knowledge as a strategic public-sector capability rather than a technical repository. It begins with multiple knowledge inputs, including employee expertise, community knowledge, stakeholder knowledge, policies, records and performance data. These inputs become organisationally useful when an enabling environment supports KM processes. KM capabilities then facilitate organisational learning and evidence-informed decision-making.

Learning and decision quality are expected to strengthen good governance practices, thereby contributing to municipal performance and service delivery outcomes. The model also includes contextual conditions and a feedback loop because service-delivery evidence should generate new learning and renew the KM cycle.

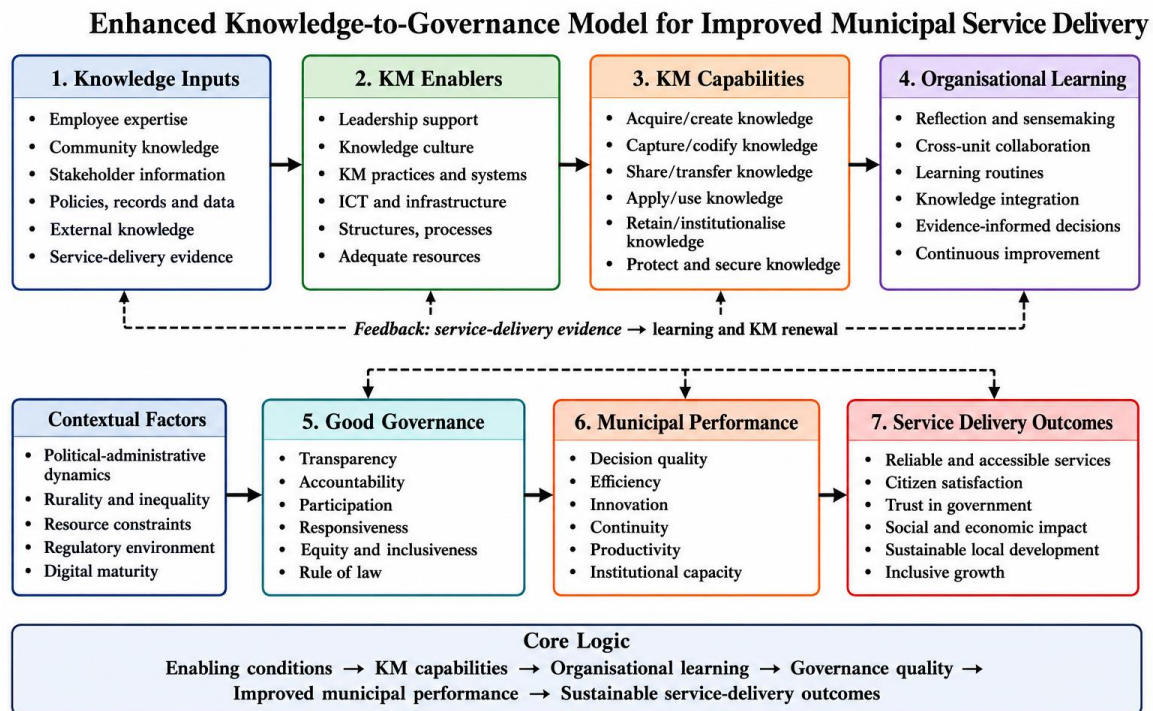


Figure: Enhanced conceptual model illustrating the knowledge-to-governance pathway for improved municipal service delivery.

Figure 1: Proposed Knowledge-To-Governance Model for Municipal Service Delivery

Note. The model is developed by the authors through the synthesis of knowledge management, organisational learning, and public governance literature. Arrows represent theoretically proposed relationships rather than empirically established causal effects.

4.1 Knowledge Inputs

Municipal knowledge originates from more than formal administrative records. Employee experience, professional expertise, community complaints, citizen preferences, contractors' technical knowledge, performance data, financial records, policies and previous project experience constitute a distributed knowledge base. The framework therefore rejects a narrow conception in which knowledge is owned by the municipality's information systems alone. Community knowledge is particularly important because local government is legally required to involve communities in municipal affairs (Republic of South Africa, 1996, 2000).

4.2 KM Enablers

Five enabling domains are proposed: leadership support; knowledge-oriented organisational culture; HRM practices; organisational structures and governance arrangements; and ICT/resources. These domains should be understood as mutually reinforcing. Leadership without systems may produce rhetoric; systems without culture may produce unused repositories; technology without HR processes may fail to capture tacit knowledge; and training without application may produce little organisational change. The model therefore treats enabling conditions as a configuration rather than as isolated variables.

4.3 KM Capabilities

The model specifies five core KM capabilities: acquisition/creation, capture/codification, sharing/transfer, application/use, and retention. This sequence is not intended to be mechanically linear. In practice, municipalities may move iteratively among these processes. The key theoretical claim is that a municipality becomes knowledge-capable when it can repeatedly move from knowing to doing and from doing to learning.

4.4 Organisational Learning and Evidence-Informed Decision-Making

Organisational learning is the principal mechanism through which KM becomes organisational capability. It involves interpreting knowledge, integrating different forms of expertise, reflecting on outcomes, revising routines and institutionalising lessons. Evidence-informed decision-making is treated as a closely related outcome because knowledge that never reaches planning, budgeting, performance management or operational decisions has limited public value.

4.5 Good Governance

Good governance is conceptualised through transparency, accountability, participation, responsiveness and adherence to the rule of law. These are not merely normative outcomes; they are processes that require reliable knowledge. Transparent decisions require accessible evidence, accountability requires traceable performance information, participation requires mechanisms for integrating community knowledge, and responsiveness requires the ability to detect and interpret changing citizen needs.

4.6 Municipal Performance and Service-Delivery Outcomes

Municipal performance is positioned as an intermediate outcome involving decision quality, efficiency, innovation, continuity and institutional capacity. Service delivery is the ultimate public-facing outcome, expressed through the reliability and sustainability of basic services, citizen satisfaction, trust, and local development capability. The framework deliberately avoids claiming that KM alone determines these outcomes. Finance, infrastructure, political stability, socioeconomic conditions and intergovernmental support remain important contextual influences.

5. PROPOSITIONS FOR EMPIRICAL TESTING

Proposition 1 (P1). Municipal leadership support for knowledge management is positively associated with municipal knowledge-management capability.

Leadership determines whether KM receives strategic legitimacy, resources, incentives and managerial attention. This proposition can be tested by examining whether municipalities in which senior political and administrative leaders actively sponsor KM exhibit stronger acquisition, sharing, application and retention practices (Gaffoor & Cloete, 2010; Mosimege & Maasdorp, 2025).

Proposition 2 (P2). A knowledge-sharing organisational culture is positively associated with municipal knowledge-management capability.

Trust, collaboration, and openness reduce behavioural barriers to knowledge exchange, whereas siloed and punitive cultures impede it. The proposition follows the knowledge-infrastructure perspective of Gold et al. (2001) and the local-government evidence on organisational barriers (Ncoyini & Cilliers, 2020).

Proposition 3 (P3). Knowledge-oriented HRM practices are positively associated with the retention and transfer of critical municipal knowledge.

Recruitment, induction, training, mentoring, succession planning and structured exit processes can reduce the loss of tacit and institutional knowledge when employees move or retire. The proposition extends the argument that human resources are an essential KM enabler in municipal settings (Gaffoor & Cloete, 2010).

Proposition 4 (P4). ICT capability positively strengthens the relationship between KM processes and knowledge accessibility and transfer.

Digital repositories, collaboration platforms, and document management systems can reduce barriers to access and coordination, but their impact depends on the quality of underlying processes and organisational culture (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; De Bem Machado et al., 2022).

Proposition 5 (P5). Municipal knowledge-management capability is positively associated with organisational learning.

Acquiring, capturing, sharing and applying knowledge create the conditions for reflection, interpretation, integration and institutionalisation. This proposition links KM process theory to Crossan et al.'s (1999) organisational learning framework.

Proposition 6 (P6). Organisational learning is positively associated with evidence-informed municipal decision-making and organisational performance.

Learning becomes valuable when it changes routines, planning, resource allocation and problem-solving. This proposition follows the knowledge-based view, which holds that organisational value depends on integrating specialised knowledge into coordinated action (Grant, 1996).

Proposition 7 (P7). Evidence-informed decision-making is positively associated with the quality of governance.

Reliable knowledge can improve transparency, accountability, participation, and responsiveness when incorporated into governance processes. The proposition is consistent with constitutional and statutory requirements for accountable and participatory local government (Republic of South Africa, 1996, 2000; Dayal, 2023).

Proposition 8 (P8). The quality of governance is positively associated with municipal service delivery performance.

Transparent, accountable, participatory, and responsive governance should strengthen municipalities' capacity to align resources and actions with community needs. This proposition is consistent with the developmental objectives of local government and with the service-delivery literature (Gaffoor & Cloete, 2010; Mosimege & Maasdorp, 2025).

Proposition 9 (P9). Good governance mediates the relationship between knowledge management capability and municipal service delivery outcomes.

The framework rejects a simplistic direct-effect explanation. KM should create public value, in part, because knowledge improves the quality of governance decisions and processes. This mediation can be tested using structural equation modelling or other longitudinal/causal designs.

Proposition 10 (P10). Political-administrative dynamics, resource constraints, digital maturity and rural-context conditions moderate the relationships among KM capabilities, organisational learning, governance and service delivery.

Municipalities operate under heterogeneous conditions. The same KM intervention may therefore produce different outcomes depending on leadership stability, skills availability, infrastructure, fiscal capacity, digital maturity and rurality. This proposition prevents the framework from assuming that KM operates identically across municipalities.

6. DISCUSSION: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The principal theoretical contribution of the framework is its integration of three literatures that are often treated separately. KM research explains how knowledge is created, captured, shared, and applied; organisational learning research explains how knowledge changes collective routines; and governance research explains how public institutions translate resources and decisions into accountable public value. By placing organisational learning and governance between KM and service delivery, the framework specifies a mechanism rather than merely asserting KM's benefits.

Second, the framework reframes municipal KM as an institutional capability. The implication is that municipalities should not evaluate KM by the presence of a database, an intranet, or a KM policy. A more meaningful assessment would examine whether employees know where critical knowledge resides, whether knowledge is shared across silos, whether community knowledge is incorporated, whether lessons alter decisions, whether institutional memory survives staff turnover and whether performance information is actually used. This is consistent with Gold et al. (2001) and the practical orientation of the SALGA toolkit (2018).

Third, the framework brings community knowledge into the KM architecture. The constitutional requirement for community involvement means that citizens are not simply recipients of municipal knowledge; they are potential producers of situated knowledge about service failures, priorities and local conditions. Treating participation as a knowledge process can deepen the meaning of participatory governance. The challenge is to establish mechanisms through which community inputs are validated, aggregated and linked to planning and performance decisions rather than simply recorded as consultation events.

Fourth, the framework has implications for human-resource strategy. Municipalities frequently focus on recruitment and training as responses to skills shortages. A knowledge perspective broadens this agenda to include knowledge mapping, critical role identification, mentoring, communities of practice, succession planning, and exit knowledge capture. Such practices are particularly relevant where scarce expertise is concentrated in a small number of employees or consultants.

Fifth, the framework provides a more nuanced interpretation of technology. Digital infrastructure is necessary for contemporary KM but not sufficient. The evidence suggests that technology should be designed around knowledge processes rather than introduced as an end in itself. A municipality that digitises fragmented records without clarifying ownership, quality, access and use may simply create faster access to poor knowledge.

Finally, the framework is directly relevant to Mpumalanga. AGSA's 2023/24 evidence indicates that many Mpumalanga municipalities continue to struggle with reliable performance information, skilled personnel, financial controls and leadership accountability (AGSA, 2025b). These weaknesses are precisely the kinds of institutional problems that a knowledge-

to-governance approach seeks to address. KM should therefore be positioned within broader municipal recovery and capability-building programmes rather than implemented as a stand-alone administrative project.

Why should these conceptual findings be taken seriously beyond Mpumalanga? First, the framework does not depend on the assumption that Mpumalanga is an exceptional municipality. It identifies a general organisational problem—how distributed knowledge is converted into collective capability—while explicitly allowing contextual factors to moderate the relationships. Second, the contemporary evidence base is geographically and organisationally diverse. Research on municipalities in Slovakia (Cajková et al., 2023), public-sector digital government (AlMulhim, 2023; Al Sayegh et al., 2023), organisational learning (Sancho-Zamora et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023), and KM enablers (Hameed et al., 2025; Cui, 2025) converges on the importance of enabling conditions, knowledge transfer and learning. The contribution is therefore not a claim of universal effect, but a theoretically coherent mechanism that can be examined across jurisdictions.

6.1 Policy Implications

Policy implications follow directly from the framework. KM should be integrated into municipal Integrated Development Plans, Service Delivery and Budget Implementation Plans, performance-management systems, and institutional recovery programmes, rather than being treated as a separate project. Municipalities should undertake periodic knowledge audits to identify critical knowledge, knowledge gaps, key knowledge holders and risks associated with employee turnover. Provincial KM standards can be developed from the SALGA toolkit while allowing adaptation to rural and urban contexts. Knowledge sharing, learning, and evidence use should be reflected in senior management performance expectations where legally and institutionally appropriate. Municipalities should establish structured mechanisms to capture and integrate community knowledge into planning and service monitoring, while ICT investments should support clearly defined knowledge processes rather than merely increasing the volume of digital records. Finally, KM monitoring should focus on use and outcomes—such as reuse of lessons, cross-departmental problem-solving, retention of critical knowledge, and changes in service-delivery performance—rather than on the number of repositories or training sessions completed.

6.2 Empirical Research Agenda

The propositions can be tested through a mixed-methods programme. A quantitative study could operationalise KM enablers, KM capability, organisational learning, governance quality and service delivery and test the structural relationships using structural equation modelling. A comparative multi-municipality design could examine whether the relationships differ between rural and urban municipalities or across different levels of digital maturity. Qualitative case studies could investigate how political-administrative relationships affect knowledge use and why formal KM systems sometimes fail to produce learning. Longitudinal designs would be especially valuable because knowledge capability and organisational learning are cumulative processes rather than instantaneous interventions.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE CONCEPTUAL STUDY

The article has three principal limitations. First, it is conceptual and therefore does not establish causal effects in Mpumalanga municipalities. Second, although the search incorporated major academic databases and authoritative South African sources, the article is

not presented as a fully exhaustive systematic review with a registered protocol or meta-analysis. Third, the proposed framework simplifies a complex institutional environment. Political contestation, fiscal constraints, infrastructure conditions, intergovernmental relations and community inequalities may influence the proposed relationships in ways that require empirical investigation. These limitations do not diminish the conceptual contribution; rather, they define the boundaries of the claims and provide a clear agenda for empirical validation.

8. CONCLUSION

This conceptual article argues that persistent municipal service-delivery problems should be examined not only through the familiar lenses of finance, infrastructure, leadership, and skills, but also through the lens of municipalities' capability to create public value from knowledge. The central argument is supported by the convergence of foundational KM scholarship and contemporary evidence from local government. Alavi and Leidner (2001) show that KM involves processes of creation, storage, transfer and application; Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) explain how tacit and explicit knowledge can be converted through organisational knowledge creation; Gold et al. (2001) demonstrate that knowledge processes depend on enabling infrastructure; and Crossan et al. (1999) explain how learning moves from individuals and groups into organisational routines. South African municipal evidence further indicates that leadership, culture, HRM, structure and technology shape KM effectiveness (Gaffoor & Cloete, 2010; Ncoyini & Cilliers, 2020; Mosimege & Maasdorp, 2025). The proposed framework extends these insights by positioning organisational learning and good governance as mechanisms through which KM can influence municipal performance and service delivery. This is theoretically more defensible than assuming a direct relationship between KM and service delivery because municipalities must interpret and legitimise knowledge, integrate it into planning and decision-making, and translate decisions into operational action. The framework also accords with the constitutional and statutory purposes of South African local government, which require accountable government, sustainable services and community involvement (Republic of South Africa, 1996, 2000). The argument is particularly compelling in Mpumalanga. AGSA's recent findings point to persistent weaknesses in leadership accountability, financial management, performance information and internal capacity (AGSA, 2025b). These conditions indicate that municipal recovery requires more than additional rules or technology. It requires institutions capable of learning from evidence, retaining scarce expertise, integrating community knowledge, sharing knowledge across organisational boundaries and converting lessons into changed practice. The proposed model consequently reframes KM as part of the architecture of good governance rather than as a peripheral information-management function. The article's ten propositions provide a testable research agenda. Empirical studies should examine whether leadership support, knowledge-oriented culture, HRM and ICT capabilities strengthen KM; whether KM improves organisational learning; whether learning improves decision quality; whether better decision-making strengthens governance; and whether governance mediates the effect of KM on service delivery. Testing these propositions across Mpumalanga municipalities would move the debate from normative claims about the value of KM to evidence about the conditions under which knowledge becomes public value. The ultimate contribution of KM to local government should therefore be judged not by how much information a municipality stores, but by whether it learns faster, decides better, governs more transparently and delivers more reliably for the communities it serves.

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