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RSA After 1996 Worst Managed Municipalities in the World — Research Document

Part One: Research Summary

The post-1996 era in South African local government has been marked by a severe and accelerating decline in municipal management and service delivery. Following the democratisation of local government, the system shifted from community-centric service to political party dominance [1]. National political parties now contest local elections every five years, resulting in decisions being made by central political leaders in Pretoria or Cape Town rather than by locally accountable representatives [2]. The Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) and the Auditor-General have repeatedly highlighted this crisis; recent reports confirm that only 13% of the country's 257 municipalities achieved clean audits in 2024 [3].

The consequences of this political capture are severe: the national unemployment rate stands at 32.9%, with youth unemployment exceeding 60% [4]. Research from the Harvard Growth Lab, published in 2023, confirms that this systemic failure has exacerbated inequality and spatial exclusion, leading to a collapse in infrastructure and service delivery across the country [5]. The report bluntly states that South Africa is defined by "stagnation and exclusion" and that "collapsing state capacity" is one of the two root causes of the country's prolonged underperformance. Consequently, South Africa is now frequently cited as having some of the worst-managed municipalities in the world, with the Auditor-General warning that dozens of municipalities are in a state of financial collapse.

Part Two: Why it Matters to you the Community

This systemic failure directly impacts your daily life. When municipalities serve political parties instead of the community, infrastructure crumbles, water and electricity fail, and local economies stagnate. The staggering unemployment rates — especially among the youth — are a direct result of this mismanagement. It matters because your hard-earned money is being wasted through corruption and incompetence rather than being invested in your town's future. Recognising this failure is the first step toward

demanding a system where local decisions are made locally, prioritising the community's needs, creating jobs, and restoring the dignity of your neighbourhood.

References

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