

SERVICE DELIVERY

SA's government trapped in a web of complexity as collapse looms



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IN MANY South African municipalities, officials now spend more time reporting on collapse than preventing it. Water systems fail while compliance reports multiply. Infrastructure projects stall inside approval chains designed to improve accountability, but which increasingly delay implementation itself.

Across government, every major failure now appears to generate another co-ordinating structure, another oversight mechanism, another verification process, or another layer of reporting.

The South African government is becoming trapped within layers of accumulated complexity whose administrative demands may now exceed the institutional capacity available to sustain them effectively.

Many of these institutional layers emerged for understandable reasons in a deeply unequal society shaped by exclusion and uneven administrative capacity. When municipalities collapse, new reporting mechanisms follow. When corruption spreads, procurement rules multiply.

When economic transformation lagged, compliance obligations expanded.

When universities struggled with student funding administration, the response was more verification, accreditation and reporting rather than institutional simplification.

Each reform sought to solve a real problem. However, over time, these accumulated responses have produced a governing system that becomes more difficult to manage with each additional intervention.

The explanation for this deterioration cannot be reduced to incompetence alone. Leadership failures,



THE South African government is becoming trapped within layers of accumulated complexity, the writer says, with the problem best illustrated by the diminishing clarity over who is ultimately responsible for ensuring that water reliably reaches households.

by KHAYA NGWENYA Independent Newspapers

corruption and political interference have undoubtedly deepened the crisis, but they operate within a governing architecture whose administrative demands have expanded beyond the organisational coherence available to sustain them.

South Africa now asks its government institutions to simultaneously deliver redistribution, transformation, infrastructure expansion, fiscal consolidation, localisation, social protection, environmental transition, regulatory oversight and democratic participation within a low-growth economy and under conditions of uneven capability.

Complexity alone is not the problem. All modern governments operate through dense systems of regulation, co-ordination and administration because modern economies are themselves complex.

The problem emerges when insti-

tutional obligations expand faster than the organisational capacity required to manage them.

High-capacity governments can absorb complexity because bureaucratic capability, technical expertise and institutional discipline expand along with policy ambition.

South Africa, on the contrary, has expanded obligations while parts of the government have weakened, fragmented or lost coherence.

The result is a government that increasingly struggles to perform even routine functions because many of its programmes assume levels of administrative co-ordination that no longer consistently exist.

The practical consequences of this overload are visible across government, but water governance illustrates the problem particularly clearly.

Responsibility for water provision

sits across municipalities, water boards, the Department of Water and Sanitation, provincial structures, the Treasury, environmental regulators and infrastructure grant systems.

When systems fail, additional intervention plans, reporting requirements, co-ordination forums and task teams are often layered onto existing structures.

Yet accountability simultaneously becomes more fragmented. Municipalities blame bulk suppliers, bulk suppliers blame municipalities, national departments cite local implementation failures, and provincial governments often lack direct operational authority.

The result is a governing system with many institutions involved but diminishing clarity over who is ultimately responsible for ensuring that water reliably reaches households.

The government therefore appears

simultaneously hyper-present and absent. The implications of this accumulation matter because complex systems create discretion, and discretion creates power.

Every additional approval layer, procurement gate, reporting structure and compliance threshold expands the number of points through which economic activity must pass.

In high-capacity economies, this may improve accountability. In weaker institutional environments, however, it often slows implementation, fragments responsibility and creates opportunities for brokerage and rent extraction.

Over time, economic success becomes tied less to productive capability and more to proximity to administrative systems. Access, mediation and procedural navigation begin to matter as much as innovation, investment and production.

What appears on the surface as policy failure may increasingly reflect a governing logic whose administrative demands have outgrown the institutional capacity required to hold them together.

This is not an argument against democracy, redistribution or transformation. In fact, societies that pursue ambitious developmental goals require unusually capable governments because governing inequality imposes a high administrative burden.

The challenge emerges when institutional ambition expands while implementation capacity weakens. Every failing governing system eventually reaches a threshold where additional reforms no longer build capability but merely redistribute dysfunction across new procedures, committees and oversight structures.

What began as mechanisms of accountability gradually harden into a governing architecture that becomes increasingly difficult to co-ordinate and execute effectively.

Institutional activity continues, reports are produced, reforms are announced and the government still appears constantly in motion.

Yet beneath the appearance of action, a more unsettling possibility emerges. The crisis no longer lies in the absence of rules or oversight, but in the growing burden of managing complexity itself.

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