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Taking a back seat: the politicization of municipal environmental governance in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Local government (LG) in South Africa (SA) is mandated to provide adequate service delivery and to ensure environmental protection within municipal boundaries. Local Environmental Governance (EG) is influenced by the actions of municipal councils and political leadership, resulting in politicized local EG. The ruling African National Congress (ANC) party has been gradually losing political power since 1994, and corruption and unprofessionalism in LG have increased and influenced EG. Limited scholars have attempted to examine the in-depth relationship between political dynamics, environmental issues and local municipalities within the political–administrative interface in SA. To address this, we utilize a Political Ecology Approach (PEA) to assess the influence of political dynamics on local EG in the uMzinyathi district and Endumeni local municipalities in SA. A mixed methods approach was utilised. The findings revealed that political dynamics both enabled and impeded local EG. While mainstreaming and alignment to national policy were evident, EG interventions and environmental resources were often co-opted for political canvassing and incentivization, or the relative prioritization of EG was dependent on political mandates. The research contributed to a detailed understanding of how EG ‘takes a back seat’ to political exigencies within a predominately fragile and under functioning LG sphere in SA.

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Politicized; environmental governance; political ecology; political–administrative interface; local government

1. Introduction: environmental governance

Environmental Governance (EG) sits at the centre of a range of different influences and pressures, and its operation is inherently political. Lemos and Agrawal (2006, p. 298) define EG as ‘*a set of regulatory processes, mechanisms and organisations through which political actors influence environmental actions and outcomes*’. Geopolitical dynamics such as international environmental treaties influence EG and environmental sustainability globally and nationally (Bodin, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2020), while environmental policies and legislation, informed by the same geopolitical dynamics, affect Local municipalities (LMs) (Gustafsson & Mignon, 2020). LMs are vital for the implementation of EG principles and directly influence EG policies and strategies by implementing environmental interventions and providing environmental services in local communities (Odiyo et al., 2022). LMs are mandated to transition towards environmental

sustainability by promoting climate resilient local economies (Senosha, 2017); however, local politics and power relations are also key influential factors as to whether the transition towards EG principles at a local municipal scale is achieved (Pasquini & Shearing, 2014).

In SA, LG is mandated to provide environmental service delivery for citizens. LMs have the potential to implement environmental interventions, policies and strategies that can contribute to progressive EG (Senosha, 2017). Yet, Pasquini and Shearing (2014) and Olver (2018) emphasized that political tensions and dynamics, as well as contests for power and access to resources, have become more apparent in South African LMs. Local EG is important in LMs and cannot be disregarded for numerous reasons such as the environment being directly linked to service delivery. Service delivery provision cannot function without environmental influence, for example, waste management and water provision. The environmental sector is also one of the largest departments in LMs and therefore provides socio-economic benefits such as temporary and permanent employment opportunities. The environmental sector provides funding opportunities for environmental-based businesses such as green energy and recycling initiatives. There are also numerous environmental education, awareness workshops and skills development opportunities in LG. However, current literature (Caldas et al., 2022; Grest, 2022; Olver, 2018) indicates that LMs are failing to manage and upgrade essential environmental-based infrastructure and the key contribution of this study is to highlight the consequences of side-lining EG and environmental issues in LG such as a loss of human and animal life, damage to infrastructure and livelihood instability.

Environmental issues in SA are directly influenced by the role and actions of LG and local political decisions (see Du Plessis, 2010; Grest, 2022; Hellberg, 2014; Mngoma et al., 2011; Odiyo et al., 2022). In contemporary South African LG, the African National Congress (ANC) has gradually been losing political power resulting from increased levels of fraud, corruption and unprofessionalism. This has contributed to high rates of unemployment, poverty and erratic municipal environmental service provision (Reddy, 2018). However, De Jager (2015) asserted that effective LG can contribute substantially to the attainment of environmental service delivery and EG objectives. Within this literature, there is limited scholarly research that goes beyond the normative understanding of politicized local EG in SA and identifies and discusses the detailed and closely knitted interactions, relationships and influence of local politics and local stakeholders in the political-administrative interface on EG and environmental service provision in SA.

To address this, we utilize a Political Ecology Approach (PEA) at the LM scale in SA. The PEA encompasses concepts such as governance, power, politics and environmental issues and assists in assessing research problems that focus on the inter-relationship between environmental issues, politics, governance and power relations (Bryant, 2015; Perreault et al., 2015). In the context of this study, the PEA is utilized to investigate and analyse the inter-relationship between local politics, power relations and EG at the political-administrative interface. The political-administrative interface is defined as the *'the relationship between the administrative and political components at the municipal level; it is this relationship which will largely determine whether policy and programs are successfully implemented'* (Reddy, 2019, p. 243). Our municipal case study sites are the uMzinyathi District (UDM) and Endumeni local (ELM) municipalities in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), SA. Drawing on in-depth fieldwork of the first author, we demonstrate

that stages of political influence and transitions in the ELM and UDM directly influenced the environmental sector over successive 5-year temporal intervals.

The findings revealed that political dynamics and power relations both enabled and impeded local EG and environmental service delivery. While mainstreaming and alignment to national policy were evident, EG interventions and environmental resources were often co-opted for political canvassing and incentivization, or the relative prioritization of EG was dependent on political mandates and interests. The research contributed to a unique understanding of the influence of political dynamics on local EG and how EG *'takes a back seat'* to political exigencies within a predominately fragile and under-functioning LG sphere in SA. The research also suggests that the environmental sector represents a crucial arena within which patronage and politicization within municipal governance can be explored. The next section provides relevant literature, followed by the research context, methodology, findings, discussion and the conclusion along with suggestions for future research.

1.2. Geographies of local environmental governance

The origin of LG has been debated by academics and is dependent on the political history of a particular country (see Caldas et al., 2022; Kersting et al., 2009). The process of industrialization increased demand for services, and other municipal functions in local communities resulted in the development of local political structures and councils that were responsible for service delivery at the local scale (Caldas et al., 2022). Over time, there is clear consensus that LG is a crucial deciding factor in the implementation of effective EG and environmental service delivery (Bennett & Satterfield, 2018; Lawhon & Patel, 2013; Pasquini & Shearing, 2014).

Analyses of municipal EG have highlighted different geographical distinctions. EG in LMs in the global north mainly viewed EG as an integrative process that involves numerous stakeholders and institutions (Mitchell et al., 2020). EG in western countries is also usually implemented and guided by neo-liberal principles, focusing on the privatization and commodification of environmental resources (Gustafsson & Mignon, 2020). Picketts (2018) emphasized that politics must be closely intertwined with EG. In an African context, the literature on EG contends that EG is nascent. In the post-colonial context, for example, a study conducted in Zambia by Rodgers (2016) revealed that economic factors in LMs are prioritized over EG decisions and that additional research is required to assist in integrating environmental sustainability with economic benefits. Rodgers (2016) further claims that local EG is influenced negatively by a lack of environmental-based human capacity and a lack of implementation of environmental legislation. Similar findings were identified by Asongu and Odhiambo (2020) in sub-Saharan Africa.

The democratic ANC government in SA prioritizes environmental issues in LG considerably (Du Plessis, 2015). The environmental health injustices and environmental-service delivery provision became a core component of democratic local governance (Du Plessis, 2015). Madumo (2015) asserted that LG in SA is centred on democratic principles. The concept of democratization in LG is described as *'a process of creating democratic institutions and overall democratic citizenship rooted in a democratic political culture'* (De Jager, 2015, p. 9). The process of democratization in SA resulted in the

broadening of environmental policy and environmental right debates, leading to the development of co-operative environmental governance (Mngoma et al., 2011).

There is evidence of inroads in the attainment of a sustainable democratic culture in LG (De Visser, 2010; Madumo, 2015). Hlahla et al. (2014) emphasized the popularity of a community development-based approach in SA that resulted in the ‘greening’ of political decisions, addressing the injustices of the past and attempting to meet the needs of impoverished communities through sustainable development and progressive EG. De Jager (2015) contends that democratic and developmental LG is an ongoing process and some municipalities such as the Midvaal LM (see Kolisang, 2019) and the Okhahlamba LM (see Asmal, 2019) have demonstrated that LMs in SA are implementing their constitutional obligations. In pursuit of deepening democratic EG, Leck and Crick (2014) suggest that collaborative decision-making and assistance between neighbouring municipalities are vital for promoting EG, which was evident in the alignment of environmental agendas between the Ugu district and eThekweni metropolitan municipalities in KZN, SA.

However, there are also a number of challenges and impediments associated with attaining local EG that have been noted. These range from stakeholder fragmentation, a lack of human capacity and environmental-based knowledge, as well as ineffective environmental policy implementation and legislation enforcement in SA (Naidoo, 2017) and a lack of environmental prioritization (Roberts, 2010). Political dynamics, contestation and objectives are acknowledged to be significant in their influence on EG in LMs (see Du Plessis, 2015; Grest, 2022; Hellberg, 2014; Odiyo et al., 2022). De Visser (2010) and Reddy (2018) have shown that political influence can affect municipal administration and operations, as well as the interface and boundaries between politics and LG. Du Plessis (2015) and Reddy (2018) have highlighted fraud and corruption in South African LMs, while Olver (2017) emphasized that political power struggles in government institutions negatively influence environmental-based decision-making by prioritizing the environmental needs of the political elite. Reddy (2018) also highlighted political factors such as factionalism and state capture that have implications on LG and service delivery, where LM councils can prioritize political mandates over EG mandates (Pasquini & Shearing, 2014).

Specifically, Pasquini et al. (2015) found that political influence can trigger the process of environmental institutionalization in LMs by allowing political champions the opportunity to promote EG in exchange for political benefits and political competition between opposing parties can result in the improvement of environmental management and environmental service delivery during elections. However, Grest (2022) and Odiyo et al. (2022) cautioned that political contestations can impede environmental institutionalization and hamper EG objectives when there are changes in political mandates in politically unstable LMs.

In an evaluative approach, Mngoma et al. (2011) and Senosha (2017) identified important characteristics of effective local EG such as institutions and law, participation, rights and representation, accountability and transparency. In a more functional approach, Pasquini and Shearing (2014) identified four factors that contribute to the progression of EG in politicized LMs: first, functional external stakeholder networks; second, the existence of political champions; third, internal social interactions and relationships within LMs and lastly, municipal incentives from engaging in and

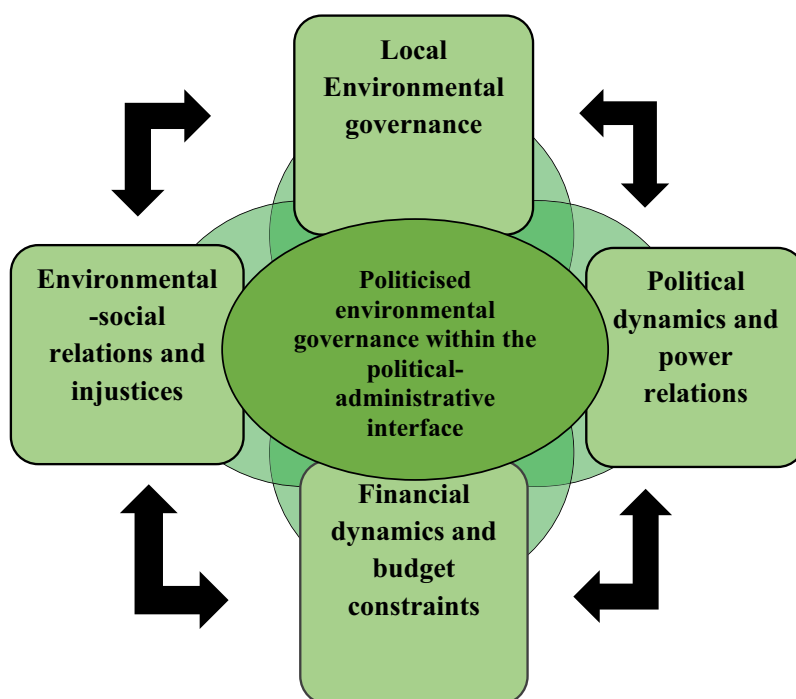


Figure 1. Politicized EG within the political-administrative interface in the Endumeni and uMzinyathi municipalities.

implementing environmental initiatives. Tangential to these approaches, we adopt a Political Ecology Approach (PEA) by utilizing relevant concepts relating to politics, the environment, governance and power relations (see Bryant, 2015; Perreault et al., 2015). Specifically, we interrogate the political ecology of EG within the political-administrative interface in SA. The application of a PEA resulted in the formation of a context-specific political ecology diagram (see Figure 1) to depict the inter-relationship between local politics, EG, power relations, environmental and social inequalities, as well as budgetary constraints within the political-administrative interface of the municipalities (Figure 1), which will be discussed in the Findings section. The next section of the paper focuses on the research context and methodology.

2. Context and methodology

LG in SA is the third sphere of government and is mandated by the South African constitution to provide service delivery within a municipal spatial boundary. LMs must adopt the roles of both a regulator and a provider of environmental-based services within their municipal boundaries. Kotze and Plessis (2015) develop environmental by-laws that are aligned with provincial and national environmental legislation (Du Plessis, 2010). The Municipal Systems Act of 2000 incorporates environmental management obligations in the municipal institutional framework and developmental policies such as providing municipal services in a financially and environmentally sustainable manner (Du Plessis,

2015). While the national government is responsible for developing the different spheres of government in a country through the process of legislation and executive power, Picard and Mogale (2015) claim that local councils have executive and legislative powers to develop and implement local legislation, approve budgets and capital projects and make decisions pertaining to Local Economic Development (LED), municipal operations and community-related issues.

Motubatse et al. (2017) claimed that government institutions in SA such as the department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) and the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) have assisted LMs in improving operational and administration duties such as becoming financially responsible and sourcing qualified human resources. The focus of co-operative EG is to ensure that all spheres of government are responsible for environmental protection and the socio-environmental upliftment of communities (Muller, 2018). However, according to Kotze and Plessis (2015), public environmental and service delivery issues are usually pushed back and forth between different spheres of government, claiming that it is not within their jurisdiction.

The application and implementation of effective EG in LMs are complicated by the fact that it is largely dependent on political support and stability from councils, municipal managers, local communities and other stakeholders. Contemporary LG in SA is composed of numerous political coalitions and political instability, and this has a profound influence on EG and the environmental sector. SA is a politically diverse and contested country with numerous challenges experienced at the LG scale. After the 1994 democratic elections, the ANC governed the majority of LMs in SA. The ANC gradually lost political power in LMs from 1996 (58.02%) to 2021 (47.90%), with political change stemming from erratic service delivery provision and persistent post-apartheid socioeconomic issues such as uneven development and high unemployment. Over this period, LG in SA has been critiqued for providing inadequate service delivery, resulting in violent community protests (see Dawson, 2014). Contemporary corruption and the so-called '*state capture*' have impacted political leadership and administration in LMs. The result has been the increasing contestation for power in LMs between parties and a shift from single party to coalition governance, complicating environmental decision-making (Thakur & Nel, *in press*). Even in politically stable LMs where councils maintain power for five-year cycles, this is usually inadequate in comparison to environmental changes that span decades and require consistent decision-making from stable councils (Lawhon & Patel, 2013).

After an in-depth consideration of numerous LMs in KZN, we identified the ELM and UDM as applicable municipal case study sites to study the politicization of Municipal environmental governance. One of the researchers obtained access to the environmental sectors of the ELM and UDM as an intern prior to the commencement of the research and this assisted in identifying numerous political and EG dynamics within the municipal study sites. It was a rare opportunity to obtain in-depth data of the issues faced within these municipalities, as we had direct access to municipal stakeholders and exposure to the study sites.

The municipal study sites are depicted in Figure 2 above. The UDM is classified as category C (District municipality) located in the North-West and central areas of the KZN province. The UDM is one of the 10 district municipalities in KZN. The UDM is surrounded by the iLembe municipality in the south-east, the Amajuba municipality in the north and the uMgungundlovu municipality in the south-west (IDP 2019/20). The UDM is regarded as one of the most impoverished districts in KZN with a high

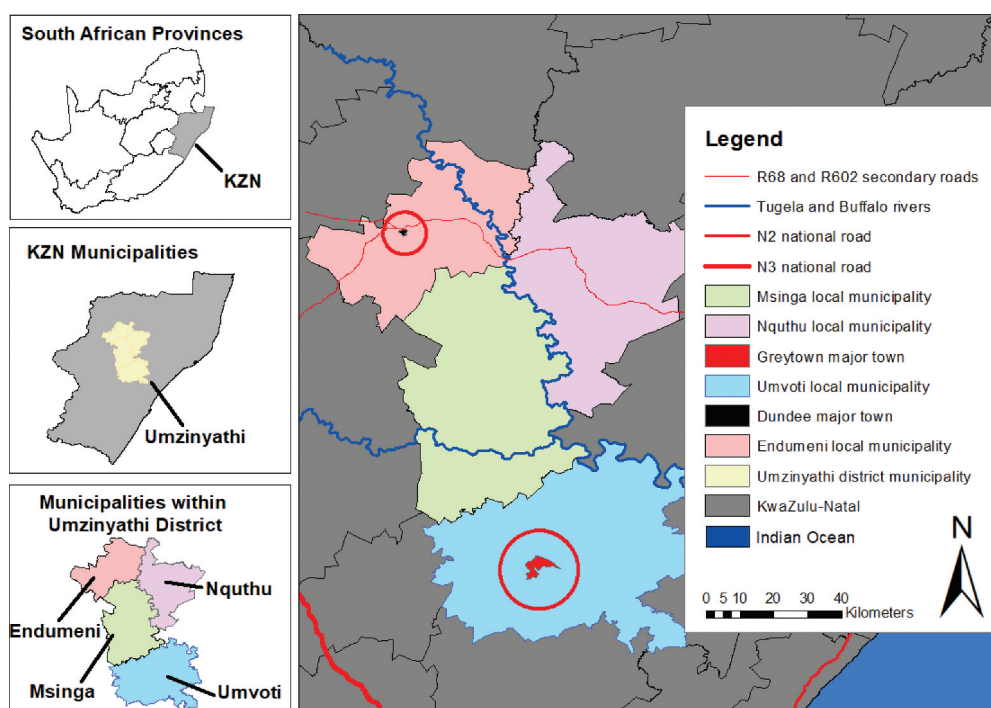


Figure 2. The study site map.

unemployment rate. The topological diversity, especially in the Nquthu and Msinga areas, acts as barriers to infrastructure development (IDP 2019/20). The four LMs that form the UDM are Umvoti, Endumeni, Msinga and Nquthu.

This research has predominately focused on the Endumeni LM, a category B municipality. The ELM is geographically the smallest of the four LMs in the UDM, houses the towns of Dundee, Glencoe and Wasbank and has the largest economic activity and budget (IDP 2019/20). Key economic activities include established light to medium industries in the agricultural, mining and commercial service sectors and relatively good standard of service delivery. The ELM has experienced numerous political contestations and instability in the last two decades, mainly from changing political leadership and from coalition to single-based councils. Over 60% of the population is youth, and hence, the ELM is struggling with a huge percentage of youth unemployment. The seat of the UDM is also located in Dundee as are all the major departmental and governmental headquarters for the district (IDP 2019/20). The political leadership in the UDM has varied from the ANC in the past and now currently the IFP.

The research findings were obtained using a mixed-method approach, consisting of non-statistical quantitative and qualitative methods. The qualitative methods comprised in-depth formal and informal key informant interviews, unstructured and structured direct observation, focus groups, meetings and workshops, as well as participatory observation in community-based interventions. The findings were obtained from various stakeholders such as municipal officials, government department officials, municipal councillors, politicians, ward committee members, the private sector, civil society and targeted impoverished

communities, as well as other essential stakeholders related to politicized EG and power relations within the study sites. A community questionnaire survey was administered within all seven wards of the ELM. A total of 600 questionnaires were administered to community members to obtain an equal representation from all seven wards in the ELM. Community members were sampled using a stratified random sampling technique in two cycles. The next section of the paper focuses on the research findings.

3. Findings: a temporal analysis: politicized environmental governance in the Endumeni and uMzinyathi municipalities

This section provides a discussion of the research findings that focus on politicized EG within the political–administrative interface that were influenced by political dynamics and power relations over four consecutive five year periods from 2000 to 2020. As depicted in [Figure 1](#), we identified blatant political interference and influence in environmental service delivery and EG within the municipal study sites, as indicated in the political dynamics and power relation box in [Figure 1](#). There were a lack of EG prioritization in comparison to political mandates and a lack of budget for the municipal environmental departments, as demonstrated in the financial dynamics and budget constraints box in [Figure 1](#). Also apparent in [Figure 1](#) was the enabling and disabling influence of politics and power relations on local EG and environmental–social injustices in communities.

There were both formalization and politicization of EG in the municipalities. The formalization achievements consisted of EG progression, environmental awareness, investment, the implementation of interventions, policy and legislation. The politicization process consisted of the utilization of environmental resources, interventions and environmental service delivery by the council and other stakeholders for political reasons. After the completion of the 2001 national local elections, the UDM was formed consisting of four LMs – Endumeni (ELM), Umvoti, Msinga and Nquthu. The ELM and UDM were governed by a combination of the ANC, Democratic Alliance (DA) and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) political parties. The ELM and UDM experienced political instability within the last two decades from 2000 to 2020. There were political contestations, a lack of effective service delivery and a lack of council leadership and municipal administration.

During the last two decades, the ELM and UDM were governed interchangeably by the ANC and IFP with a few occasions of an IFP, DA and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) coalition council. This interchangeable governance and political leadership resulted in different ward councillors, ward committees and stakeholders who possessed political power for limited periods, creating a diverse and complex political and governance environment in the municipalities. It was also evident that the municipal study sites gradually progressed towards attaining EG principles; however, there were challenges in achieving effective EG.

3.1. Lacking in priority: environmental governance from the year 2000 to 2005

EG during the early 2000s was largely non-existent in the UDM and ELM. According to numerous veteran municipal officials, *‘the environmental sector of the ELM was placed in the community services department’* (Interview, 12 September 2019, Dundee, SA). The ELM and UDM did not consider EG as a priority, and the only environmental considerations were the provision of environmental-based service delivery. This included

refuse collection services, water provision, parks and gardens responsibilities such as the cutting of trees and grass and the occasional planting of trees. The ELM also administered an unregulated dumping site from the UDM that did not abide to environmental legislation and regulations. The lack of environmental considerations in the ELM and UDM indicated that EG was at a developing stage. Reddy (2018) and Caldas et al. (2022) stated that the core focus of LG is to provide services to a particular geographical area demarcated under its jurisdiction. This was evident in the ELM and UDM; however, environmental compliances were clearly lacking.

Environmental management priorities in the municipalities were absent and fragmented. The ELM and UDM councils did not prioritize environmental issues, and budget limitations for the environmental sector were common. The presence of budget limitations and a lack of financial resources in LMs were also evident in a study conducted by (Madumo, 2015). The planning and implementation of community-based environmental interventions were non-existent, as the ELM and UDM lacked human capacity with environmental qualifications and resources for implementing environmental interventions. Moti (2019) indicated that it is common for management positions to be occupied by incompetent, yet politically inclined individuals and the political governance structure of LMs are based on popularity, comrade loyalty and reciprocity in SA.

The lack of environmental prioritizing indicated poor EG in the ELM and UDM. However, the formation of environmental legislation, policies and plans was at a developmental stage, which indicated improved EG. The ELM and UDM councillors approved the formation of basic environmental by-laws pertaining to waste management, environmental health, the maintenance of local parks, grass cutting and agriculture. However, there were no by-laws that included environmental conservation and preservation. The importance of environmental by-law formation was emphasized by Du Plessis (2010). Du Plessis (2010) stated that environmental by-laws must be aligned with provincial and national environmental legislation. According to a former ELM councillor, *'municipal officials and council members lacked knowledge of environmental issues and were only focused on service delivery and political strategies'* (Interview, 10 June 2019, Dundee, SA). The ELM and UDM Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) did not prioritize environmental issues and briefly included environmental service delivery issues. There was also a lack of environmental forums and stakeholder interaction during this period, indicating a lack of environmental knowledge and public participation in environmental issues.

3.2. Increasing stakeholder interaction: environmental governance from 2005 to 2010

The political structure of the ELM and UDM changed during this period, as the ANC claimed more municipal wards during the 2006 local elections followed by the IFP and DA in the ELM and UDM. The change in political leadership did not have a major influence on EG, as a former UDM councillor confirmed that environmental issues remained unprioritized, *'we focused on IDP projects in ANC- weak communities for future political support'* (Interview, 22 October 2019, Glencoe, SA). The councils also did not consider environmental management as a major budget priority. A limited budget was provided for environmental-based

service delivery, and this excluded environmental awareness projects and interventions.

Roberts (2010) and Pasquini and Shearing (2014) found that LMs in SA are influenced by political mandates that are usually prioritized over EG mandates. Despite the lack of EG at the ELM and UDM, there were increased stakeholder interactions between environmental departmental stakeholders and the councils, indicating improved environmental collaboration. The UDM adopted more of a supportive role in guiding the ELM towards a more environmentally sustainable path, *'we decided to convene meetings with ELM officials to discuss environmental issues that affected both the ELM and UDM'* (Interview, 10 April 2020, Dundee, SA). There was also environmental capacity support provided to the municipalities from government departmental stakeholders on environmental knowledge and funding opportunities in the environmental sector.

3.3. Improvising environmental governance from the year 2010 to 2015

There was a slight improvement towards implementing EG during this period. An ELM official stated that *'government departments pressurised the municipality to become environmentally compliant and create functioning environmental departments through environmental legislation and compliance mandates'* (Interview, 21 August 2020, Dundee, SA). The UDM and ELM also created disaster management and environmental planning departments. Mbulawa (2019) stated that LMs in SA are gradually abiding to compulsory national legislation, policies and strategies and this was also apparent in the municipal study sites. In 2014, the landfill site licence of the ELM was reviewed and approved.

However, according to a former ELM councillor, *'unqualified, politically affiliated officials continued to be hired in environmental-based positions'* (Interview, 23 May 2021, Dundee, SA), indicating that cadre appointments in the environmental sector were still occurring. The findings indicated that environmental issues again took a back seat to political priorities such as the recruitment of comrades. A marginal amount of the municipal capital budget was invested in the environmental departments. The rate of municipal ageing infrastructure outweighed capital budget investment, and this had a detrimental impact on environmental service provision. The municipal environmental departments were dependent on financial assistance from government departments such as COGTA and SALGA. Motubatse et al. (2017) also found that government institutions such as COGTA and SALGA have assisted LMs financially with infrastructural procurement.

The relevant stakeholders such as the local media encouraged environmental prioritization. A former UDM councillor stated that *'the local media, the private sector and civil society pressurised the municipalities to prioritise environmental issues'* (Interview, 10 June 2019, Dundee, SA). The prioritization of EG in the municipalities resulted in the improvement of environmental-based by-laws and the completion of various environmental plans, strategies and local environmental policies such as Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs). However, there were challenges in the implementation and enforcement of municipal environmental policies, by-laws and plans.

3.4. Progress and codification amidst political transition: 2015–2020

During this period, the findings indicated that the municipalities made significant progress towards implementing a more resilient and effective EG agenda. In SA, local EG responsibilities are mandated by legislation Du Plessis (2015), for example, the Municipal Systems Act of 2000 includes environmental management obligations in the institutional framework and developmental policies of LMs. The municipalities attempted to integrate national environmental policies and principles with local plans and strategies. In addition, the Local Environmental Government Support (LEGS) official was placed in the municipalities in 2016. The LEGS official assisted the municipalities in transitioning towards a more functional and compliant environmental agenda by conducting annual environmental analysis, reporting draft proposals on environmental activities and identifying environmental resources, sector plans and training. An ELM official confirmed that *'the municipalities received environmental capacity assistance from provincial departments to improve EG such as the LEGS official'* (Interview, 11 July 2022, Dundee, SA).

However, the findings revealed that the municipal environmental plans, strategies and policies were not always implemented effectively. The major challenges for a lack of implementation were related to political, financial and administrative constraints. In 2016, there was a political leadership change in the municipalities and the ANC was replaced by an IFP, DA and EFF coalition. A lack of environmental prioritization continued under the new coalition council, demonstrating that local political parties have a similar environmental mindset that is influenced by regional and national party mandates. There were also legal and compliance challenges on EG in the municipal study sites. The LEGS official claimed that municipal environmental officials and councils developed environmental sector plans which *'collected dust on the shelves without been implemented nor reported on'*. This was despite the fact that the municipalities have a constitutional and legal mandate to ensure that these responsibilities are performed (Interview, 9 February 2022, Glencoe, SA).

The findings also revealed that most employees from the municipal study sites lacked environmental knowledge. In the PEA, the process of attaining environmental knowledge and participatory environmental education is prioritized. EG was influenced negatively by bureaucratic decisions made by the municipal council. A former ELM councillor claimed that *'the red tape process and bureaucracy at the municipalities is lengthy and frustrating for managers'* (Interview, 12 March 2022, Glencoe, SA). There was also a political influence on environmental legislation and planning in the municipalities. The approval of environmental by-laws was a slow process with a lack of environmental by-law enforcement due to insufficient budget to recruit qualified environmental enforcement officials. Du Plessis (2010) cautioned against the lack of implementation and enforcement of municipal environmental by-laws due to a lack of human capacity. A UDM official claimed that *'the municipalities have severely understaffed environmental departments, and this negatively impacts EG'* (Interview, 21 June 2021, Dundee, SA).

The approval and initiation of environmental-based forums by the ELM and UDM councils were lacking. An ELM councillor claimed that *'approved environmental forums were largely unsustainable due to poor participation by relevant stakeholders, therefore it was a waste of time and resources'* (Interview, 25 June 2021, Dundee, SA). However, in accordance with democratic LG principles, a council resolution was taken to include environmental management as a permanent agenda item in municipal planning and forums. It was apparent that during municipal LED forums, environmental issues *'took a back seat'* to socioeconomic and political issues such as council support for coal mining proposals that encouraged employment opportunities for comrades. The 2020 municipal financial year was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. An ELM official claimed that *'environmental-based workers were exposed to risks from Covid-19'* (Interview, 14 December 2020, Dundee, SA). An allegation for the misuse of environmental sector funds was provided by an ELM general worker, *'a portion of the municipalities COVID-19 relief fund was supposedly saved for the 2021 local elections'* (Interview, 6 January 2022, Dundee, SA), indicating that political issues were still prioritized during the pandemic.

3.5. Community perceptions on politicized EG in Endumeni

A community questionnaire was administered to respondents in the seven ELM wards, and a question regarding the influence of politics on EG and environmental service delivery was enquired and the findings are depicted in [Figure 3](#) above. Over 50% of respondents questioned in wards 1, 6 and 7 agreed that politics directly influences EG and environmental service delivery. The community respondents claim that municipal officials and councillors tend to motivate for comrades to obtain employment opportunities from the environmental sector, whereas the majority of respondents from wards 2, 3 and 4 who supported the ruling party claimed that the politics had no influence on EG. De Visser (2010) and Reddy (2018) also emphasized the political influence on the administration and operations of LMs in SA. Some respondents stated that *'the rewarding of comrades is not fair; councillors only implement environmental interventions in specific communities that are favoured for political reasons'* (Interview, 6 March 2022, Dundee, SA).

Reddy (2018) also highlighted the negative impact of political factors such as factionalism, abuse of political power and state capture on EG and service delivery in SA. Community members mentioned that councillors and municipal officials *'simply don't care about the environment'* and *'we have not seen them involved in environmental interventions'* (Interview, 6 March 2022, Dundee, SA). Community members also complained about the ineffectiveness of councillors and municipal officials on environmental issues, *'nothing changes, people don't listen to them and continue to degrade the environment'* (Interview, 6 March 2022, Dundee, SA). Hellberg (2014) stated that municipal councils often utilize environmental resources and interventions to obtain political support from communities, which was also evident within the municipal study sites.

In March 2020, there were disparities in political party support between ELM and UDM environmental officials, resulting in decision-making conflicts and difficulties in implementing environmental interventions collaboratively. Pasquini et al. (2015) found that political contestations between municipal officials can impede environmental

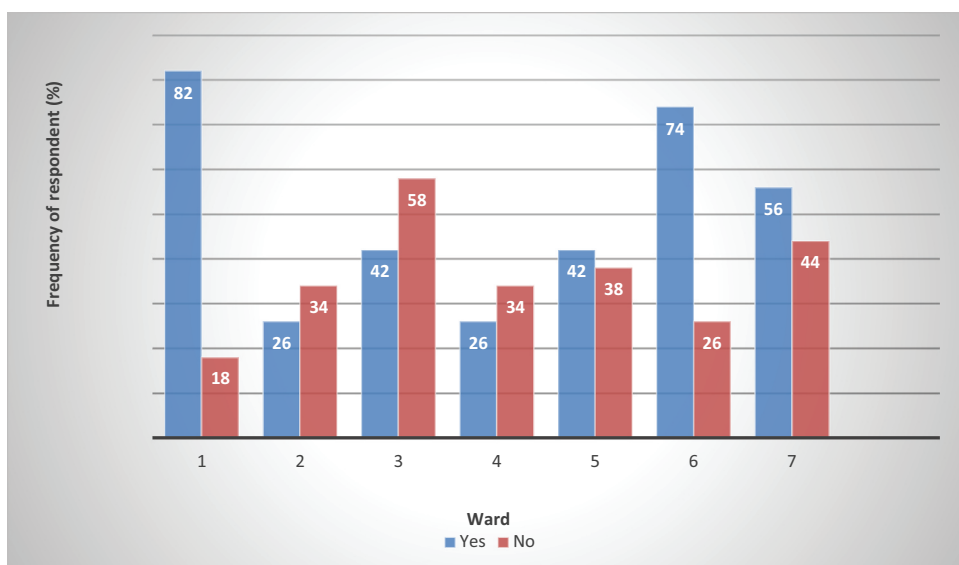


Figure 3. Political influence on EG and environmental service delivery in the Endumeni local municipality, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, 2020 ($n = 600$).

institutionalization and hamper progressive EG when there are changes in political mandates and the discontinuation of environmental interventions in politically unstable LMs. Picketts (2018) and Olver (2018) emphasized the inter-relationship between communities, politics and EG, claiming that politics must be closely intertwined with EG.

4. Discussion: EG at the political–administrative interface

An analysis of the subtle progression made by the municipalities towards attaining EG and providing environmental services within the political–administrative interface was provided. The political–administrative interface in the municipalities often deprioritized EG commitments due to political mandates and interests. The study distinguished multiple ways in which EG was politicized, at times deprioritized and placed in the back seat to political priorities over the 20-year period. EG was shaped by broader political processes and power relations and utilized as a tool in political canvassing and incentivization, as also evident in studies conducted by Mngoma et al. (2011), Bodin (2017) Senosha (2017) and Reddy (2018) in SA and globally.

The novel political ecology diagram formulated in Figure 1 depicts politicized EG dynamics within the political–administrative interface of the municipalities. We identified the political influence in environmental service delivery and EG within the municipal study sites, as evident in studies conducted by Pasquini and Shearing (2014) and Olver (2018). There were a lack of EG prioritization in comparison to political mandates and a lack of budget for the municipal environmental departments. There were also enabling and disabling influences of politics and power relations on local EG and socio-environmental injustices in communities. Mukwedeya (2015) and Reddy (2018) also

identified political conflict and power inequalities that resulted in unethical political structures and contestations in South African LMs.

As highlighted before, the research indicated how the environmental sector was used as a source of power to control the distribution of environmental incentives and opportunities as apparent in research conducted elsewhere by Mngoma et al. (2011), Hellberg (2014), Pasquini et al. (2015) and Houdet (2016). EG was only prioritized in certain instances such as to sustain political support in politically affiliated communities and as a source of political incentivization, and this trend has become normative in contemporary LG in SA. The councils politicized environmental meetings and workshops and only supported and attended environmental meetings and workshops when it suited a political agenda, indicating that the environmental sector is utilized as a political tool of persuasion for political control and power. The stability and understanding between the political–administrative interface in LMs are vital for the transition towards EG; however, it seems as if the environmental sector and EG are likely to be controlled, dictated and prioritized erratically at the hands of political and power interests in South African LG.

5. Conclusion – taking a back seat?

The study examined the sensitive inter-relationship between local EG, politics, power relations and LG within the political–administrative interface by adopting a PEA. It was apparent that EG *‘takes a back seat’* to political mandates and interests as expected; however, a unique outlook was also provided of how the environmental sector is manipulated by political actors and was often utilized as a tool to obtain political support from communities. The study went beyond the normative understanding of politicized local EG and identified and discussed the detailed and closely knitted interactions, relationships and influences of local politics and local stakeholders in the political–administrative interface. There was progression towards the attainment of EG principles, yet EG interventions and resources were mainly used for political purposes such as political persuasion.

The research contributed to understanding how interactions within the political–administrative interface in LG within South Africa influence and shape EG, environmental issues and environmental service provision. The environmental sector provided a unique arena to study the politicization of municipal governance and patronage. The study also emphasized that politics is intertwined in EG decision-making and planning that impacts socioeconomic issues in communities. Municipal service delivery cannot stand alone without the environment, and the consequences of side-lining environmental issues in LG have numerous consequences such as a loss of human and animal life, damage to infrastructure and livelihood instability. We suggest that future research should focus on a comparison study of politicized EG in LMs from different geographic areas (rural and urban) in SA and globally with different budgetary and operational factors.

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Disclosure statement

This study was financially sponsored by the National Research Foundation of South Africa, and this may lead to certain content of the study being licenced to the National Research Foundation of South Africa. I have hereby disclosed these interests fully to Taylor & Francis and have a conflict resolution plan for any potential conflicts resulting from this agreement.

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