Integrated Ethics Management Framework (IEMF) for Local Government in South Africa

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Abstract: This article presents a comprehensive IEMF designed specifically for local government in South Africa, with particular application to metropolitan municipalities. Drawing on institutional theory, virtue ethics, and stewardship theory, the framework addresses the persistent challenges of ethical governance, corruption, and public trust deficits that have plagued South African local government. Through a phased implementation strategy over 36 months, the framework integrates with existing municipal systems including performance management, risk management, financial controls, service delivery, and human resources. The framework offers a practical, theoretically-grounded approach to rebuilding public trust and institutional integrity in South African local government.

Keywords: Ethics management, Institutional theory, Local government, Municipal governance, Public integrity stewardship theory, Virtue ethics

1. Introduction

Local government in South Africa plays a key role in running the country and providing services to people, but city and town councils still struggle with issues like corruption, when leaders get involved in politics too much, problems with how they buy goods and services, situations where personal interests affect decisions, poor handling of money, and a drop in how much the public trusts them. These issues have led to problems in delivering services and have caused resources meant for community growth to be used elsewhere. The article proposes an Integrated Ethics Management Framework (IEMF) for South African local government. This framework is based on institutional theory, virtue ethics, and stewardship theory. It argues that ethical governance should focus on changing structures, cultures, and individual behaviors, not just following rules. The framework includes steps to prevent ethical issues by creating a strong moral foundation and culture, ways to find out if anyone is breaking ethical rules by watching and reporting, and actions to make sure rules are followed properly and that the organization learns from any mistakes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

The proposed IEMF is founded on three complementary theoretical perspectives (Institutional theory, Virtue Ethics theory and Stewardship theory) that collectively address the complexity of ethical governance in local government contexts. Institutional theory provides the foundation for understanding how regulatory, normative and cultural-cognitive pillars influence organisational behaviour (Scott, 2014). It also explains how mechanisms such as learning, competition and coercion contribute to the spread of innovations, including management frameworks, across municipalities (Berry & Berry, 2018). This perspective is particularly relevant in South Africa, where municipalities often learn from one another and adopt governance practices, while institutional theory also contributes to understanding policy diffusion and variations in formal government structures. Virtue Ethics theory shifts focus from compliance-driven approaches to character development and moral reasoning capabilities among public managers (Audi, 2012). Stewardship theory posits that public officials should act as stewards of public resources, prioritizing the long-term interests of citizens over short-term personal or political gains (Hsu and Zhang, 2025). The framework consequently recognises that ethical governance is shaped not only by formal regulations but also by normative expectations and cultural-cognitive influences, providing a broader theoretical foundation for strengthening ethical management practices across municipalities.

2.2 Gaps in Current Approaches

The literature on ethics management in local government, particularly in the South African context, reveals several gaps. First, there is a tendency to focus on compliance mechanisms (rules, codes, procedures) without adequate attention to the cultural and normative dimensions of ethical conduct. Second, many interventions are reactive rather than proactive, responding to scandals rather than preventing them. Third, ethics management is often treated as a standalone function rather than integrated into core municipal systems and processes. Fourth, there is insufficient attention to the development of ethical capabilities among public officials,

with training often limited to information provision rather than character development and moral reasoning. The proposed IEMF addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive, theoretically grounded approach that integrates preventive, detective, and responsive components and is embedded in existing municipal systems.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted with approval from relevant institutional ethics committees. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality was maintained, with data anonymized and participants given the option to review findings related to their contributions.

3. Discussion

The framework recognizes that effective ethics management requires a comprehensive approach addressing multiple dimensions of organizational and individual conduct. The framework comprises three interconnected components: (*see Appendix A*)

Preventive Measures establish proactive ethical infrastructure that minimizes opportunities for misconduct. This includes enhanced ethical policies, stratified training programs, and ethics-based recruitment and promotion. The preventive component is grounded in institutional theory's recognition that organizational structures and processes shape behavior, and virtue ethics' emphasis on developing ethical character and capabilities. Detective Measures ensure timely identification of ethical breaches through multiple overlapping systems. This includes integrated risk monitoring, structured integrity audits, and multi-channel reporting mechanisms. The detective component recognizes that even with strong preventive measures, ongoing monitoring is necessary to identify emerging issues and ensure accountability. Responsive Measures ensure consistent and fair handling of ethical breaches while supporting ethical behavior. This includes graduated sanction systems, ethics advisory and support services, and restorative justice processes. The responsive component reflects stewardship theory's emphasis on accountability and learning, and virtue ethics' concern with rehabilitation and development.

3.1 Implementation Strategy

The implementation of the framework follows a phased approach over 36 months. Phase 1 (Months 1-12) focuses on foundation building, including leadership endorsement, policy refinement, establishment of implementation structures, and initial awareness campaigns. Phase 2 (Months 13-24) involves system integration, with targeted implementation in high-priority departments, specialized training, active monitoring, and pilot reporting mechanisms. Phase 3 (Months 25-36) consolidates and mainstreams the framework organization-wide, with formal evaluation and integration into core municipal processes. Critical to successful implementation is the integration of the framework with existing municipal systems. This includes embedding ethics in performance management, risk management, financial controls, service delivery, and human resources processes. This integration ensures that ethics becomes a defining thread in all aspects of municipal governance rather than a standalone compliance function.

3.2 Theoretical Contributions

The proposed framework makes several theoretical contributions. First, it demonstrates how institutional theory, virtue ethics, and stewardship theory can be integrated to provide a comprehensive foundation for ethics management in local government. Second, it extends these theories to the specific context of local government in a developing country, addressing challenges that may not be adequately captured in theories developed primarily in Western contexts. Third, it provides a bridge between theoretical insights and practical implementation through the specification of concrete measures and processes.

3.3 Practical Implications

The framework has significant practical implications for local government in South Africa. First, it provides a systematic approach that can guide municipalities in developing comprehensive ethics management systems. Second, it offers specific measures and processes that can be adapted to different municipal contexts. Third, it emphasizes the importance of integration with existing systems, reducing the risk of ethics management being treated as a standalone, peripheral function. The framework offers a way to move beyond reactive, compliance-oriented approaches to ethics management toward a proactive, integrated approach that addresses the structural, cultural, and individual dimensions of ethical conduct.

4. Limitations and Future Research

While the framework is grounded in theoretical literature and empirical findings, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The framework has been developed primarily for large municipalities, and its applicability to smaller municipalities with different institutional contexts requires further investigation.

5. Conclusion

The proposed IEMF offers a comprehensive, theoretically grounded approach to addressing the persistent challenges of ethical governance in South African local government. By integrating preventive, detective, and responsive measures within a systematic implementation strategy, the framework provides municipalities with a practical path toward rebuilding public trust and institutional integrity. The successful implementation of the framework, particularly its integration with existing municipal systems, would represent a significant step toward realizing the constitutional vision of local government as a sphere of democratic and accountable governance.

Ethical Statement: The data in this article was taken from a work in progress of a PhD study that collected the data anonymously and provided participants with detailed privacy policy and rights.

AI Statement: The authors confirm that no generative AI tools were used in the conception, writing, analysis or interpretation of this study.

Competing interests: The authors declare that there is no competing interest associated with this publication.

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Appendix A: IEMF Model

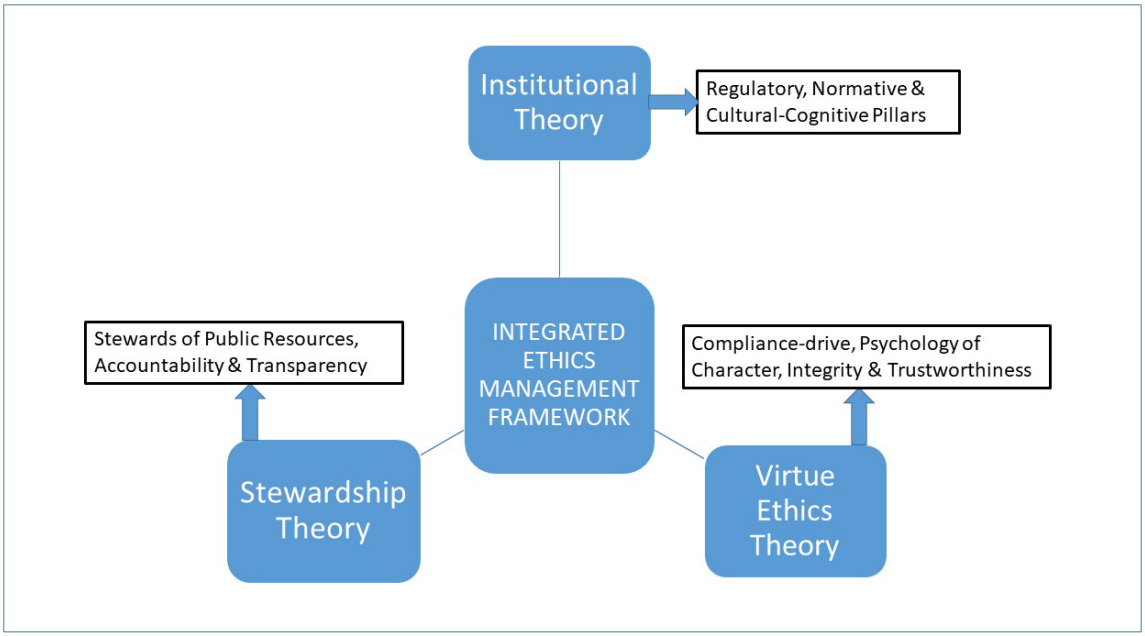


Figure 1: Simphiwe's IEMF model (2026)