

Corruption and Human Rights Violations: The Role of Local Government in Curbing Corruption and Its Effects on Citizens' Access to Rights

Xoliswa Jwili

Democracy Development Program, South Africa

and

Ruth Kolevsohn

Executive Director, Governance Programmes, Good Governance Africa, South Africa

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Abstract

Local government—the sphere closest to people—is constitutionally mandated to realise human rights through essential service delivery. Yet persistent corruption, weak internal controls and institutional capture systematically divert public resources, entrench inequality, and erode the rule of law. This article examines the relationship between corruption in local government and the violation of human rights in South Africa and asks how local integrity systems can mitigate these effects. Drawing on a comparative case study of the Midvaal and Madibeng Local Municipalities, it demonstrates that robust integrity systems function as human rights infrastructure. Midvaal Local Municipality, operating as a positive outlier and symbolic beacon within a dysfunctional municipal landscape, shows that integrated anti-corruption and rights frameworks produce measurable improvements in rights outcomes, while Madibeng Local Municipality illustrates the causal pathways through which corruption translates into concrete rights violations. The article argues that anti-corruption and human rights agendas are mutually reinforcing and must be pursued together.

Keywords: local government, corruption, human rights, integrity systems, South Africa

1. Introduction

In South Africa, local government is constitutionally mandated to realise human rights through the delivery of essential services (Jam, Bayat and Rulashe 2024). This responsibility is grounded in the founding values of human dignity, equality and the advancement of rights, which must be achieved through inclusive governance that prioritises transparency and accountability. However, the growing number of poorly performing municipalities and the sustained increase in service delivery protests signal significant structural failures (Mamokhere 2023). Rather than serving the public, local government is frequently undermined by corrupt and politically connected officials who divert state resources away from critical services (Mabebe 2021).

Corruption and human rights have historically been treated as separate scholarly domains. Anti-corruption scholars focus on institutional design and financial transparency (Rose-Ackerman and Truex 2013), while human rights scholars concentrate on civil and political liberties. However, the two are intrinsically connected. Corruption undermines rights by diverting resources from communities. Human rights violations, in turn, create environments where corruption flourishes by weakening the rule of law and accountability mechanisms (Peters 2015; Mathiba 2021). This nexus is most visible at local government level, where municipalities bear direct responsibility for water, sanitation, housing and primary healthcare (Ngumbela 2023).

This article addresses the following research question: *How does corruption in local government affect the realisation of human rights in South Africa, and how can local integrity systems mitigate these effects?* It aims to fill a gap in literature on the systematic integration of anti-corruption and human rights frameworks at the local government level.

The study adopts a comparative case study design focussed on two Category B municipalities operating within the same constitutional and fiscal framework. Despite these shared institutional conditions, the municipalities display markedly different governance outcomes. The comparative design follows a “most similar systems” logic in which both municipalities operate within the same legislative and intergovernmental framework but produce contrasting governance and rights outcomes. This enables institutional design, accountability mechanisms and political commitment to be isolated analytically as key explanatory variables. Midvaal Local Municipality—recognised for consistent clean audits, strong financial management, a Memorandum of Understanding with the South African Human Rights



Commission (SAHRC), and an adopted Integrity Management Strategy—is positioned as a positive outlier and symbolic beacon—a rare institutional configuration in which integrity systems and human rights frameworks reinforce one another. Madibeng Local Municipality, characterised by persistent audit failures, organised corruption and documented rights violations, including discriminatory land-lease practices, illustrates the more typical pattern of systemic municipal failure. Data was drawn from Auditor-General reports, SAHRC investigations, municipal policy documents, civil society analyses, and media reporting, and analysed thematically, with the Madibeng corruption–rights pathways presented as a structured narrative of causal sequences, focussed on participation, accountability, non-discrimination and rights outcomes.

2. Human rights, corruption, and local government: A conceptual framework

Human rights are understood here through three complementary lenses. Legally, they are inalienable entitlements codified in international instruments—including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights—and domestically in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, which places a fourfold duty on the state to respect, protect, promote and fulfil these rights (Mathiba 2021; Moyo 2021). Normatively, human rights establish the equal worth of persons and provide the benchmark for evaluating state conduct (Mathiba 2021, 14). Practically, they are defined by the lived experiences of citizens as they encounter the state through service delivery, public participation and access to justice (Patel 2019).

From a governance perspective, human rights constitute the foundational purpose of the state. Social contract theory holds that state power is legitimate only insofar as it safeguards dignity and rights (Kumm 2018). When officials engage in corruption—distorting public decision-making or diverting resources—the state breaches this contract and undermines its own authority (Mkhize and Nel-Sanders 2025). These effects are cyclical. Corruption erodes public trust and participation, reduces municipal revenue, constrains service delivery and creates conditions for further extraction.

South Africa's constitutional order further deepens this relationship through the principle of transformative constitutionalism, which conceives the Constitution not merely as a framework for limiting state power, but as an instrument for restructuring deeply unequal social and economic relations inherited from apartheid. Within this framework, local government occupies a uniquely important position, because municipalities are expected to advance substantive equality through developmental governance, spatial redress, participatory democracy and equitable service delivery. Corruption, therefore, represents more than administrative inefficiency or financial misconduct. It actively obstructs the transformative project embedded within the Constitution itself. When public officials divert resources intended for housing, sanitation, infrastructure or local economic development, corruption reproduces historical exclusion and entrenches structural inequality. In this sense, corruption undermines not only individual socio-economic rights, but also the constitutional aspiration to build a more just and inclusive society. The constitutional duties imposed on municipalities under sections 152 and 153—including the promotion of social and economic development and the encouragement of community participation—thus position anti-corruption governance as a prerequisite for constitutional transformation rather than a parallel governance concern. These constitutional obligations provide the analytical basis for the comparative case analysis that follows. Rather than treating corruption as a problem of administrative failure alone, the article examines how differing levels of institutional integrity shape municipalities' ability to fulfil their constitutional duties to promote participation, advance social and economic development and realise fundamental rights.

A rights-based framework transforms social needs into enforceable legal claims and repositions citizens from passive beneficiaries into active rights-holders (Boulos and La Barbera 2022). Section 7(2) of the Constitution obligates the state to respect, protect, promote and fulfil the Bill of Rights. Section 195 requires efficient, effective and ethical public administration. Corruption directly undermines both constitutional obligations (Fourie and Malan 2022). Human rights simultaneously function as a check on power. Freedom of expression enables investigative journalism and whistleblowing; freedom of association permits civil society mobilisation; and access to information enables scrutiny of procurement and budgeting (Muslim and Mais 2023). Together, these rights constitute the ecosystem within which corruption can be contested.

Framing corruption through a human rights lens clarifies its broader social and constitutional consequences. First, it violates the right to equality and non-discrimination when access to public housing or services is conditioned on bribes, distributing state resources by proximity to power rather than need (Peters 2015). Second, it directly undermines socio-economic rights. Every misappropriated Rand (South African currency) reduces the state's capacity to deliver healthcare, education, water and sanitation. Third, it corrodes civil and political rights by distorting the rule of law, compromising judicial impartiality and denying citizens equal access to public life (Sancin 2021).

Local government occupies a pivotal position within this nexus. It is simultaneously the most corruption-vulnerable sphere of government and the sphere most directly responsible for the realisation of socio-economic rights (Edoun, Rameetse and Pooe 2023). Decentralisation has transferred extensive responsibilities to municipalities without commensurate institutional capacity, creating opportunities for procurement irregularities and embezzlement (Shah and Thompson 2004). Face-to-face service delivery interactions expose citizens to petty bribery and extortion, while close-knit community networks blur the boundaries between public duty and private obligation (Barr, Lindelöw and Serneels 2009). Consolidated reports from the Auditor-General of South Africa document the scale of the problem. Hundreds of municipalities record irregular expenditure, unauthorised expenditure and material findings annually on financial statements, with a significant proportion receiving disclaimed or adverse audit opinions (Auditor-General South Africa 2025). The SAHRC has simultaneously documented how these fiscal failures translate into violations of the rights to water, housing, healthcare and equal treatment, confirming that what auditors record as financial mismanagement is experienced by citizens as the denial of constitutional rights (SAHRC 2022). Yet local government's same proximity to communities enables participatory mechanisms—public hearings, ward committees, participatory budgeting within the Integrated Development Plan—that are structurally impossible to replicate at national level, and its failures are immediately experienced by residents, creating conditions for mobilisation and oversight (Boufounou et al. 2024; Msenge and Nzewi 2021).

The developmental local government model adopted in post-apartheid South Africa further intensifies the significance of municipal governance in the rights-realisation process. Municipalities are not merely administrative units implementing national policy, they are constitutionally mandated developmental actors tasked with improving community quality of life through participatory, responsive governance and instruments such as the Integrated Development Plan. However, where corruption infiltrates procurement systems, planning processes or political appointments, the developmental mandate of local government becomes distorted. Resources are redirected away from public needs toward private accumulation, public participation becomes performative rather than substantive, and communities lose trust in formal democratic institutions. The resulting governance failures disproportionately affect poor and marginalised communities that rely most heavily on public services and possess the fewest private alternatives. Corruption at the municipal level, therefore, functions as a mechanism through which structural inequality is reproduced across generations.

This article advances the conceptual proposition that a robust local integrity system—understood, following Transparency International's National Integrity System (NIS) model, as a set of interdependent institutional pillars comprising the municipal council, executive, administration, internal audit, civil society, media and citizens (Fourie and Malan 2022)—constitutes human rights infrastructure. This synthesis integrates integrity-system theory with the core principles of the human rights-based approach—participation, accountability, non-discrimination, empowerment and linkage to law (Golub 2020; De Man 2022; Rispoli and Vannucci 2025). Participation functions as both a fundamental right and a structural safeguard. Genuine citizen engagement improves transparency and exposes irregularities before they compound. Accountability operates on two levels—empowering citizens as active rights-holders to challenge duty-bearers, and equipping oversight institutions with clear normative benchmarks. Non-discrimination is directly undermined by corruption, which distributes public resources by political connection, rather than need. Empowerment equips communities with the knowledge and legal standing to resist corrupt demands and claim entitlements. Linkage to law transforms reform from a managerial exercise into a constitutional mandate. When these five principles are embedded within functioning institutional pillars, anti-corruption ceases to be a technocratic exercise and becomes a constitutive condition for the realisation of rights.

The NIS model is not applied uncritically here; it is used cautiously, given critiques that it can become a broad institutional checklist and may under-theorise power, capture and political economy (Brown and Heinrich 2017). The same volume documents cases in which anti-corruption institutions were themselves redirected for political ends, formally performing their oversight function while being used to advance competing interests. This article proceeds with the NIS model despite these limitations, because its analytical purpose here is comparative and diagnostic rather than predictive: it is used to identify which institutional pillars are present, absent or functioning in each municipality, and to trace how the presence or absence of specific pillars corresponds to differences in rights outcomes. The political economy of capture—why certain pillars fail in Madibeng and hold in Midvaal—is addressed directly through the comparative case analysis that follows, rather than through the NIS model's own internal theorisation.

3. Analysis and findings

The comparative analysis that follows examines how these theoretical relationships manifest in practice through two contrasting municipal governance contexts.

3.1. *Corruption—Rights violation pathways in Madibeng Local Municipality*

Madibeng illustrates four pathways through which corruption undermines human rights, each linked to a distinct dimension of the conceptual framework.

Pathway 1—Non-discrimination and socio-economic rights: Auditor-General reports document ZAR51.4 million in irregular expenditure in the 2020–2021 financial year alone, with persistent audit qualifications across successive years and a pattern of unauthorised expenditure extending over multiple financial cycles. SAHRC findings confirm that this fiscal leakage translates directly into inadequate access to water, sanitation, and housing—services that the Constitution requires the state to progressively realise for all residents. When infrastructure funds are diverted through corrupt procurement, the state fails its constitutional obligation, and the burden falls disproportionately on the most marginalised residents who have no private alternatives. The rights violation is a direct and measurable consequence of the corruption.

Pathway 2—Non-discrimination and equality: The SAHRC’s investigation found discriminatory land allocation practices that excluded Black applicants and fuelled racial tensions (SAHRC 2019). Allocation decisions driven by political networks rather than transparent, needs-based criteria constitute both a corruption failure and a constitutional violation of the right to equality and equitable access to land. In Madibeng, corruption operates as a mechanism of structured racial inequality that actively entrenches historical marginalisation rather than redressing it, inverting the transformative mandate of the post-apartheid constitutional order.

Pathway 3—Accountability and access to justice: Institute of Security Studies (ISS) documentation identifies protection networks that shield implicated officials from disciplinary consequences, while whistleblowers face retaliation (ISS 2023). These dynamics undermine the constitutional right to lawful and procedurally fair administrative action under section 33 of the Constitution and the right to effective remedies. The Promotion of Administrative Justice Act 3 of 2000 guarantees procedurally fair administrative action, however, where oversight collapses and consequences are absent, these guarantees are rendered formal rather than substantive. Rights remain formally recognised, but practically unenforceable—the architecture of accountability exists on paper, while impunity operates in practice.

Pathway 4—Participation: Reports of intimidation against protesting residents create a chilling effect on civic participation. Informal restrictions on expression, assembly and association suppress the scrutiny that would otherwise constrain corrupt conduct. The Integrated Development Plan process, which the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 requires to be participatory, becomes a procedural formality, rather than a genuine mechanism of democratic accountability. When communities are discouraged from participation, the early-warning function of civic oversight weakens, and corruption compounds without correction.

3.2. *The local integrity system in Midvaal Local Municipality*

Midvaal demonstrates that local integrity systems can function as human rights infrastructure when all five institutional pillars operate effectively.

Pillar 1—Political commitment and linkage to law: The Memorandum of Understanding with the SAHRC constitutes an explicit legal and institutional commitment to rights-based governance. Human rights norms are embedded as guiding principles rather than external constraints, institutionalising the linkage to law that the conceptual framework identifies as foundational.

Pillar 2—Accountability through transparent administration: Consistent, clean audit outcomes over successive financial years evidence robust procurement and financial management systems. Transparency reduces opportunities for resource diversion and directly protects both socio-economic rights and participatory rights by ensuring that public funds reach intended beneficiaries. The clean audit outcome represents more than financial compliance. It is institutional evidence that public resources are being directed toward their constitutional purposes rather than diverted through corrupt procurement chains.

Pillar 3—Independent oversight and accountability: Effective internal audit functions, public accounts committees, and the additional horizontal oversight layer provided by the SAHRC monitoring process create multiple accountability checks that no single actor can neutralise. The SAHRC’s oversight role is particularly significant. It transforms human rights compliance from a normative aspiration into a monitored institutional obligation, providing an external reference point against which municipal conduct can be assessed and challenged. Unlike Madibeng, where oversight institutions have been captured or rendered ineffective, these mechanisms in Midvaal produce the deterrence necessary to sustain integrity over time.

Pillar 4—Participation as a right and safeguard: Institutionalised public consultation in budgeting and Integrated Development Plan processes enables community input and monitoring. Participation operates simultaneously as a constitutional right under the Constitution

and as a preventive anti-corruption mechanism, consistent with evidence that genuine citizen engagement exposes irregularities before they compound (Rispoli and Vannucci 2025). In Midvaal, participation is structured, rather than tokenistic. Community members engage meaningfully with budget priorities and service delivery plans, creating an informed public capable of identifying and reporting deviations from stated commitments.

Pillar 5—Consequences and non-discrimination: Unlike Madibeng, integrity breaches in Midvaal trigger disciplinary and corrective responses. The presence of real consequences creates deterrence, restores institutional trust and signals that the municipality's rights commitments are substantive, rather than performative. This pillar is central analytically. Without meaningful consequences, all other pillars—transparency, oversight, participation—operate without enforcement and ultimately collapse into procedural theatre. Midvaal's willingness to act on integrity breaches is the institutional expression of non-discrimination in practice. It affirms that no official is above the law and that public resources belong to all residents equally.

Midvaal's significance extends beyond technical compliance with financial management standards. Its relative success reflects the institutionalisation of a governance culture in which accountability, administrative professionalism and public participation reinforce one another over time. Rather than relying solely on the personal integrity of individual political leaders, the municipality has embedded oversight and compliance mechanisms within routine administrative processes, reducing opportunities for arbitrary decision-making and procurement manipulation. This institutional continuity is particularly significant within the South African local government context, where frequent political instability and cadre-based appointments often undermine long-term governance capacity. Midvaal demonstrates that where merit-based administration, transparent systems and enforceable accountability structures are sustained, municipalities are better positioned to fulfil both developmental and constitutional obligations.

Importantly, stronger governance outcomes also appear to reinforce citizen trust and institutional legitimacy. Public confidence in municipal administration contributes to improved civic cooperation, including greater willingness to participate in consultation processes and to pay for municipal services. The relationship between trust and governance sustainability is critical, because municipalities depend heavily on public compliance and revenue collection to maintain infrastructure and deliver services effectively. While Midvaal should not be romanticised as a universally transferable model—given the substantial socioeconomic differences between the two cases—its experience nevertheless demonstrates that institutional design and political commitment materially shape rights outcomes even within broader environments of systemic governance stress.

These socioeconomic differences are not incidental to the “most similar systems” design and warrant explicit treatment. Midvaal is a smaller, peri-urban municipality in Gauteng with a comparatively affluent, formally employed population and has been governed by the Democratic Alliance; Madibeng is a larger, predominantly rural municipality in North West Province with a poorer, largely informally employed population and has been governed by the African National Congress. Governing party affiliation is, therefore, a plausible independent variable rather than a background condition, and it cannot be fully disentangled from the institutional design differences this article treats as explanatory. Two considerations nevertheless support the article's emphasis on institutional design. First, consolidated Auditor-General reporting shows a wide spread of audit and governance outcomes among municipalities governed by each of South Africa's major parties, which suggests that party affiliation alone is a weak predictor of the pillar-level failures and successes documented here, even though this article does not undertake the systematic cross-municipal analysis that would be required to isolate the size of that effect precisely (Auditor-General South Africa 2025). Second, the mechanisms identified in this article—audit compliance, protection networks shielding officials from consequence, participatory budgeting practice and consequence management for integrity breaches—are administrative and institutional in character rather than direct expressions of party ideology, and each is independently documented in the primary sources (Auditor-General South Africa 2025; ISS 2023; SAHRC 2019, 2021, 2022). The comparison should, therefore, be read as showing that institutional design and political commitment matter within, and not merely alongside, whatever influences governing party and socioeconomic context exert on municipal performance; it does not claim that party and context are irrelevant.

3.3. *Comparative rights outcomes*

Across all four analytical categories, governance design produces measurable differences in rights realisation. On access to water and sanitation, Midvaal consistently meets delivery targets and reports high levels of service reliability, while Madibeng experiences chronic infrastructure failures—burst pipes, reservoir collapses and extended outages—that the SAHRC has linked directly to failures of financial and operational management. On access to housing and land, transparent, criteria-based allocation processes in Midvaal constrain discretionary abuse, while Madibeng's discriminatory land allocations produced constitutional violations confirmed by the SAHRC's

2019 investigative report. On equal treatment, systems-based decision-making in Midvaal constrains bias and patronage. In Madibeng, corruption facilitated documented racial inequality in the distribution of public resources. On participation and access to information, Midvaal proactively publishes budgetary and operational data, enabling meaningful public monitoring through accessible ward-level reporting, while Madibeng residents face barriers to information and documented intimidation when they attempt to participate in governance processes. Finally, levels of public trust and willingness to pay for services are markedly higher in Midvaal, reflecting the social contract that rights-based governance sustains—and which corruption systematically destroys.

These outcomes do not represent incidental variations in municipal performance. They are the measurable product of different institutional configurations operating within the same legal, constitutional and fiscal framework. That both municipalities face the same national legislative requirements, the same anti-corruption statutory framework, and the same intergovernmental fiscal transfer regime makes the divergence between them analytically significant. It isolates institutional design and political commitment—rather than external resources or legal environment—as the primary drivers of differential rights realisation. This does not suggest that institutional design alone determines municipal performance. Historical inequality, fiscal pressures, political instability and uneven administrative capacity continue to shape governance outcomes across South Africa's local government landscape. However, the comparison demonstrates that institutional integrity materially influences whether these pressures are mitigated or compounded.

4. Discussion

The comparative findings substantiate the article's central thesis. A robust local integrity system functions as human rights infrastructure. Midvaal's outcomes are not incidental, they derive from institutional arrangements that systematically integrate transparency, oversight, participation and accountability. As a symbolic beacon, Midvaal demonstrates that improved governance and rights outcomes are achievable within the same national constitutional environment that produces widespread municipal dysfunction.

Its significance lies not in being exceptional, but in being instructive. It demonstrates that institutional design and political commitment can materially affect whether rights are realised or violated.

As set out in Section 3.2, Midvaal's institutionalisation of accountability, administrative professionalism and participatory practice—rather than reliance on individual political leadership—is what allows it to sustain rights-protective governance across electoral and administrative turnover.

Madibeng, conversely, should be understood not simply as a poorly performing municipality, but as an illustrative case of systemic governance failure reflecting broader structural patterns across South Africa's local government landscape. The four corruption-rights pathways identified in Madibeng are not idiosyncratic. They recur across municipalities characterised by weak accountability, captured oversight and absent political commitment to rights. The analytical value of the comparison lies precisely here. Midvaal illuminates what is possible when integrity systems function, while Madibeng reveals the causal mechanisms through which their absence translates into lived rights deprivations.

Three central insights follow. First, anti-corruption and human rights are mutually reinforcing. Transparent systems simultaneously protect fiscal integrity and substantive rights, while rights frameworks empower citizens and institutions to contest corruption. Treating anti-corruption and human rights as separate governance agendas is both analytically limiting and practically counterproductive. Recent international initiatives, including the 2025 guide *Bridging Anti-Corruption and Human Rights Efforts* and the SAHRC's direct engagement with municipal governance, reflect growing recognition of this interdependence. Second, corruption's rights impacts are traceable and measurable, not merely normative. The governance failures documented in Madibeng—inadequate water access, discriminatory land allocation, official impunity and suppressed civic participation—can each be linked to identifiable governance failures through the thematic narrative tracing undertaken in this article. This matters for accountability. Rights violations arising from corruption are not unintended systemic outcomes, but the foreseeable consequences of specific institutional decisions and omissions and should be treated as such in both administrative and legal responses. Third, political commitment must be institutionalised rather than personalised. Midvaal's integrity system does not rest on the character of individual officials. It is embedded in formal agreements, internal systems and organisational culture. Sustainable improvement requires institutional embedding rather than reliance on exceptional leadership that cannot be guaranteed across election cycles.

This institutionalisation is particularly important in contexts characterised by political volatility, factionalism and uneven administrative capacity. Anti-corruption reforms that depend primarily on charismatic leadership or short-term political will are often vulnerable to

reversal after leadership transitions or electoral change. Sustainable integrity systems require routinised accountability mechanisms, professional public administration, protected oversight institutions, and empowered communities capable of maintaining pressure for transparency over time. The Midvaal case suggests that governance resilience emerges not from isolated interventions, but from the cumulative interaction between legal frameworks, institutional culture, citizen participation and credible consequences for misconduct. Strengthening local governance, therefore, requires moving beyond compliance-oriented reform toward the construction of durable accountability ecosystems capable of surviving political turnover and resisting institutional capture.

For local governments, integrating human rights frameworks into integrity strategies is not a compliance burden, but a governance dividend. It strengthens anti-corruption efforts, improves audit outcomes, raises service delivery performance and rebuilds the public trust on which revenue collection depends. For national government, embedding integrity and rights indicators within intergovernmental monitoring and support systems—including the Municipal Infrastructure Support Agent and the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs—is essential to scaling these lessons beyond exceptional cases. For civil society, linking corruption monitoring to measurable rights impacts, strengthens both advocacy campaigns and public interest litigation. For international development partners, dual-focussed programming that integrates integrity systems with rights-based governance offers a coherent, evidence-grounded model of local government reform that moves beyond purely technocratic approaches.

5. Conclusion

This article has argued that combating corruption at the local government level is not merely a matter of administrative efficiency, but a fundamental human rights imperative. Through comparative analysis of Midvaal and Madibeng Local Municipalities, it has been demonstrated that corruption systematically undermines citizens' access to water, housing, equal treatment and participation, while robust local integrity systems protect these rights. Midvaal's experience within a broader context of municipal dysfunction demonstrates that the institutional conditions for rights realisation are achievable. Madibeng's experience illustrates the governance and rights consequences that emerge when these systems fail.

The central insight is that effective anti-corruption work at the local level must be designed with explicit human rights objectives. Transparency, accountability, participation and non-discrimination are not optional additions—they are the essential foundations of both anti-corruption governance and constitutional rights fulfilment. When municipalities adopt human rights frameworks, they strengthen their integrity systems. When they combat corruption, they protect rights. The two agendas are not parallel, but inseparable and must be pursued together.

This integrated approach has significance beyond South Africa. In an era of growing institutional distrust and democratic backsliding, the local government level is where citizens encounter the state most directly and where the consequences of governance failure are felt most immediately. Local governments that operate as symbolic beacons—demonstrating in practice that integrity and rights can reinforce one another even within challenging national environments—offer an evidence base for reform that is more persuasive than normative argument alone.

Across the African continent, rapid urbanisation, increasing decentralisation and growing public demands for accountable governance are placing unprecedented pressure on local government institutions. Municipalities increasingly function as the frontline sites at which citizens evaluate the legitimacy and effectiveness of the state itself. In this context, the integration of anti-corruption and human rights frameworks offers a practical and normatively grounded model for strengthening democratic governance at the local level. Aligning integrity systems with rights-based governance also advances broader continental and global commitments, including the African Union's Agenda 2063 and Sustainable Development Goal 16, which emphasise accountable institutions, inclusive governance and access to justice. Municipal governance should, therefore, be understood not merely as an administrative concern, but as a central arena in the struggle for democratic resilience, social justice and sustainable development across Africa. Efforts to combat corruption and advance human rights are therefore inseparable.

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