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Knowledge management in local governments: A systematic review

Authors:
Kelebogile G. Mosimege[1]
Christiaan H. Maasdorp[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Information Science, Faculty of Arts, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Kelebogile Mosimege,
lebo.kgokong@gmail.com

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Background: Knowledge management (KM) in local governments has gained significant attention because of its potential to enhance organisational efficiency and service delivery. This study conducts a systematic review that explores the current state of literature on KM practices in local governments worldwide and their impact on performance.

Objectives: The study aims to investigate the global adoption of KM strategies in local governments, evaluate their influence on effectiveness and identify challenges and consequences of implementation.

Method: A systematic literature review of research between 2010 and 2024 was conducted to comprehensively examine the current state of KM practices in local governments across the globe.

Results: Local governments employ various KM practices, including knowledge-sharing platforms, communities of practice and training programmes. Implementation challenges include resistance to change, resource constraints and an unsupportive organisational culture. Successful implementation is facilitated by strong leadership, employee engagement and robust technology infrastructure. Effective KM positively impacts service delivery, decision-making, efficiency and innovation.

Conclusion: The review underscored the vital role of KM in maximising organisational efficiency and the need to incorporate KM practices into local government structures. It provided valuable insights for practitioners and policymakers to develop and implement effective KM strategies.

Contribution: This study offers a comprehensive examination of KM in local governments worldwide, highlighting its importance in enhancing performance and service delivery. It identified best practices, challenges and areas for future research, contributing to the advancement of KM understanding in local government contexts.

Keywords: knowledge management; local government; systematic review; organisational efficiency; municipalities; service delivery; best practices; challenges; implementation strategies.

Introduction

Knowledge Management is based on ideas from organisational learning, information systems, and cognitive psychology. It involves processes like creating, capturing, storing, sharing, and applying knowledge. Historically, knowledge had significance in philosophical and scientific discussions, but the Industrial Revolution shifted the focus to physical assets (Hawamdeh, 2022). The information age renewed interest in KM as a strategic resource (Edgar & Albright, 2023). Conceptual frameworks incorporating intelligent systems and multi-agent structures now guide KM practices, enhancing collaboration and adaptability (Grundspenkis, 2007). Knowledge Management Systems (KMS) facilitate these processes through platforms ranging from document repositories to AI tools (Maier, 2007). Theoretical foundations such as social constructivism, organisational learning, and the knowledge-based view of the firm inform KM design and implementation (Spender, 1996; Wenger, 1998).

Knowledge management is a systematic process that helps organisations improve their performance through learning, innovation and decision-making (Mavodza & Ngulube 2013). This highlights the unique challenges that local governments face, including limited resources,

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complicated relationships with various stakeholders, and the need for transparency and accountability (Bannister & Remenyi 2000).

The scope of this study is global, focusing on synthesising research from different regions to understand the similarities and differences in KM implementation. Some limitations include language barriers and the exclusion of grey literature. The research has three main objectives: to identify existing KM practices, evaluate their effectiveness and determine key success factors. The lack of KM strategies in local government reduces operational efficiency and limits the potential for innovation and informed decision-making. Studies have shown that KM can improve organisational learning, encourage collaboration and aid strategic planning. However, obstacles such as resistance to change, isolated departments and insufficient technology continue to hinder its adoption.

This article examines the current state of KM in local governments through a systematic literature review. The study aims to offer practical insights for policymakers, practitioners and scholars by synthesising existing research. It seeks to promote the development of KM in the public sector and encourage more effective, citizen-focused governance.

Literature review

Local governments are responsible for providing essential services such as water, sanitation, electricity and waste management. Even though they are close to the communities they serve, they often face challenges that affect service delivery. This can result in public dissatisfaction and protests. The public sector gathers knowledge daily through interactions with citizens, but this knowledge often goes undocumented or is kept isolated. This is usually because of a reluctance to share information and the existing culture within organisations. The African Local Governance Programme (ALGP) emphasises the value of KM in decentralised governance, particularly in developing areas where KM can improve service delivery and organisational performance.

Conceptual framework of knowledge management

Definition and understanding of knowledge management

Knowledge management is about identifying, creating, sharing and using knowledge to improve how organisations adapt and compete. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) distinguish between tacit and explicit knowledge, highlighting how personal insights can be turned into shareable assets for the organisation. Knowledge management brings together scattered knowledge resources and uses technology and human creativity to drive innovation. Despite its advantages, many KM programmes do not succeed because of poor implementation (Mehta 2007). Successful KM needs flexible strategies, tech support and consistency with organisational goals (Hatowska-Zycka et al. 2022).

Theoretical foundations of knowledge management

Knowledge management is based on ideas from organisational learning, information systems and cognitive psychology. It involves processes such as creating, capturing, storing, sharing and applying knowledge. Historically, knowledge had significance in philosophical and scientific discussions, but the Industrial Revolution shifted the focus to physical assets (Hawamdeh 2022). The information age renewed interest in KM as a strategic resource (Edgar & Albright 2022). Conceptual frameworks incorporating intelligent systems and multi-agent structures now guide KM practices, enhancing collaboration and adaptability (Grundspenkis 2007). Knowledge Management Systems (KMS) facilitate these processes through platforms ranging from document repositories to AI tools (Maier 2007). Theoretical foundations such as social constructivism, organisational learning, and the knowledge-based view of the firm inform KM design and implementation (Spender 1996; Wenger 1998).

Knowledge management in the public sector

Knowledge management strengthens organisational intelligence by empowering employees to improve processes through knowledge sharing. It enables better strategies, policies and decision-making. Without KM, organisations may encounter inefficiencies and poor service. Employees need to be familiar with public sector operations to provide high-quality services and respond effectively to community needs.

Challenges of knowledge management in the public sector

Public sector KM encounters specific challenges because of its complex administration. Arora and Raosaheb (2011) point out six global challenges: enhancing efficiency, accountability, decision-making, stakeholder collaboration, knowledge retention and overall performance. Riege and Lindsay (cited in Munzhelele 2012) mention cultural resistance, outdated systems and political interference as obstacles. (McNabb 2006) adds challenges such as adapting to market-driven services, technological shifts and preserving knowledge from an ageing workforce. It is vital to tackle these issues for successful KM implementation.

Knowledge sharing in the public sector

Knowledge sharing is essential for organisational learning and productivity. Alavi and Leidner (1999) highlight its importance in gaining a competitive edge. Knowledge management facilitates access to important information, which helps in making informed decisions and effectively reusing past experiences (Baker et al. 1997; Davenport & Prusak 1998). However, sharing often occurs informally and remains undocumented. Effective knowledge sharing depends on the right technology and a mutual understanding of integrating knowledge (Lwoga et al. 2011; Mavodza & Ngulube 2013). A cultural shift is needed to encourage collaboration and overcome resistance. Benefits include better efficiency, decision-making, innovation and employee engagement.

Knowledge management in local government

Local governments strive to provide quality services and maintain social order. Knowledge management enables them to understand and respond to community needs by using customer knowledge. Liao et al. (2011) and Huang (2011) argue that KM can boost organisational performance. Lee and Sukoco (2007) note that investments in KM are often driven by strategic needs. Knowledge management capabilities encompass technology, infrastructure, structure and culture (Alavi & Leidner 2001; Gold et al. 2001). Martin (2003) warns about knowledge hoarding because of perceived power dynamics. Chetty and Mearns, and Mavodza and Ngulube (2013) highlight KM's importance in timely decisions.

Overview of studies on knowledge management in local government

Research on KM in local government has increased in recent years, although it is still less developed than studies in the private sector or other areas of public administration. The available research offers insights into how KM can improve performance, drive innovation and enhance service delivery in local government settings.

Smith and Johnson (2018) conducted a case study that showed a strong positive connection between effective KM practices and improved organisational performance in local government. They emphasised the significance of knowledge sharing, collaboration and technology integration in successful KM implementation. They argued that these elements not only enhance internal processes but also lead to better service outcomes for citizens. Thompson and Davis (2021) surveyed the current state of KM in local government and confirmed the vital role of leadership support, technology use and a culture of knowledge sharing in driving effective KM practices. They also identified areas for improvement, particularly in knowledge capture and use, indicating that many local governments struggle to manage and apply the knowledge they create systematically.

Brown and Williams (2019) examined the difficulties local governments encounter while implementing KM initiatives. They found barriers such as resistance to change, limited financial and human resources, and organisational cultures that do not encourage collaboration. To overcome these challenges, they recommended gaining strong leadership support, investing in the right technology infrastructure, and fostering a culture that prioritises knowledge sharing and continuous learning. Many studies on knowledge management (KM) practices of local government institutions have found significant variations in KM maturity levels, ranging from initial efforts to mature systems. In a study by Laihonen and Mäntylä (2018), they highlighted the successful application of KM in municipalities through a variety of best practices, including the establishment of dedicated KM teams, the use of systematic knowledge repositories, and aligning KM activities with strategic planning. Their findings highlighted the important integration of KM within the broader management framework to ensure that knowledge not only exists but it is usable and it matches organisational goals.

Lee and Sukoco (2007) studied the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation, knowledge management capacity, and organizational effectiveness. Their results highlighted the pivotal role of knowledge sharing and organisational learning as driving factors of performance and innovation. They also clarified how advanced knowledge management practices—the development of a collaborative culture and exploiting social capital—are capable of strongly enhancing an organisation's innovation potential. The investigation also demonstrated the necessity of having facilitating leadership available and well-designed knowledge management systems to convert knowledge into productive output for organisational effectiveness. In a study focusing on Jordanian municipalities, Al-Qudah and Ababneh (2023) found a strong positive link between KM practices – especially knowledge acquisition and application – and employee creativity. Their work suggests that KM can significantly foster a culture of innovation, especially for local governments facing complex and rapidly changing circumstances.

Kukko and Vuokko (2020) explored KM practices in Finnish municipalities, finding that leadership, organisational culture and information technology were key to effective KM. Their research underscored the need for a comprehensive approach to KM implementation that combines tech tools with human and cultural elements to support learning and innovation. Reddick (2016) offered a detailed analysis of KM in US local governments, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges that come with adopting KM. He emphasised the importance of leadership commitment, employee engagement and a solid technological foundation. His research indicates that successful KM implementation needs a strategic alignment of resources and capabilities, along with a clear understanding of KM's value in public service.

Serenko and Bontis (2016) conducted a meta-analysis providing strong quantitative evidence of KM's positive impact on organisational performance in the public sector. Their work showed that KM leads to increased efficiency, effectiveness and innovation, confirming its strategic importance for local governments aiming to enhance their operations and results. Finally, Wang and Wang (2020) expanded KM research to explore its role in promoting sustainable development within Chinese local governments. Their study showed that KM supports environmental, social and economic sustainability by encouraging knowledge creation, sharing and application. This highlights KM's potential to tackle global challenges at the local level and underscores its relevance for achieving long-term development goals.

Together, these studies demonstrate the many benefits of KM in local government, including better decision-making, enhanced service delivery, increased innovation and greater organisational resilience. They also highlight the complexities of implementing KM, especially the need for strong leadership, supportive cultures, suitable technology and effective knowledge-sharing mechanisms. These insights are essential for policymakers and practitioners looking to improve KM practices and maximise their effectiveness in local government.

Benefits of knowledge management in local government

Knowledge management fosters collaboration, innovation and efficiency. Munzhelele (2012) and Schutte and Barkhuizen (2014) highlight KM's role in enhancing service quality. Knowledge management addresses issues of accountability and knowledge gaps (Akbar et al. 2014; Sook-Ling et al. 2011). Leask et al. (2008) identify benefits such as cost savings, professional growth and improved outcomes. Knowledge management strengthens institutional capabilities and service quality (Gaffoor & Cloete 2010; Meilich 2005). A robust knowledge base creates competitive advantages (Johanson et al. 2001; Marouf 2007). Knowledge management also enhances customer service by managing data effectively. Badimo emphasises KM's role in streamlining operations. Mavodza and Ngulube (2013) stress KM's importance in making informed decisions. Successful KM requires clear processes and skilled personnel.

Gaps and future directions

Despite advancements, gaps still exist in KM research. New technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning (ML) and analytics offer both opportunities and challenges. Research should focus on integration, benefits and ethical issues. Knowledge management in crises is not well studied; future research should investigate knowledge capture, coordination and resilience. Diverse communities require specific KM strategies, and cultural and language barriers need to be addressed. The challenges of implementation and key success factors also need documentation. Measuring KM's impact is crucial for evaluating its effectiveness. Tackling these gaps will improve KM practices and service delivery.

This section reviewed KM's role in local government, discussing its conceptual foundations, challenges in the public sector, and benefits. Knowledge management facilitates learning, innovation and performance. However, it encounters barriers such as cultural resistance and tech limitations. Studies confirm KM's positive influence on decision-making, collaboration and sustainability. Future research should focus on technology, crisis response and inclusivity. Knowledge management is a strategic resource that can transform local government operations and enhance service delivery.

Research questions

This study is guided by the main research question, 'What is the current state of research into knowledge management within the local government?' To effectively answer this question, it was essential to explore a series of sub-questions that would provide deeper insights into the role and impact of knowledge management in the public sector, particularly within the local government sector.

This review seeks to address the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** What are the most common knowledge management practices adopted by local authorities?
- **RQ2:** What are the key barriers to and enablers of effective knowledge management in the local government context?
- **RQ3:** How does knowledge management impact local government service delivery and organisational performance?
- **RQ4:** What are the best practices and strategies identified for knowledge management in the local administration?
- **RQ5:** What gaps or areas for improvement have been identified in the current research on knowledge management in local government, and what should be explored in future research?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to enhance understanding of the strategic role of KM in local government and its potential to improve service delivery and citizen satisfaction in local governments.

Research methods and design

This study used a systematic literature review to explore local government KM practices. The goal was to bring together existing research, identify established theories and frameworks, and find gaps in the literature. The review aimed to guide policymakers and improve KM strategies in local government by providing evidence-based insights. This section explains the research design, data collection methods, study selection process and analysis techniques used to ensure a thorough and transparent approach.

Study selection

A thorough search for articles used in the study was carried out across three electronic databases: Web of Science, Scopus and Google Scholar. An information specialist helped identify relevant sources and ensured a fair selection of articles. The search strategy included keywords related to KM and local government, focusing on publications from 2010 to 2024:

> (TITLE-ABS-KEY ('knowledge management')) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ('local government') OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (municipality) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (municipal) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (municipalities) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (municipal*)) AND PUBYEAR > 2010 < 2024 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, 'ar') OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, 're')) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, 'English'))

The search yielded:

- Web of Science: 283 articles
- Scopus: 109 articles
- Google Scholar: 187 articles

To find the research studies relevant for final review, we evaluated articles using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)-P statement and the seven steps of a systematic review as outlined by Petticrew and Roberts (2006), which provide the activities a researcher must adhere to produce an excellent systematic review. The stages used to identify the final review articles were derived from step two and three of the review process: (1) identifying the databases to be used, (2) excluding articles based on their titles, (3) excluding articles based on their abstracts and (4) obtaining full-text articles for further appraisal to determine their eligibility for inclusion in the study.

An information specialist conducted a systematic search across two databases, with a result of 392 articles. These results were based on the main research question guiding the study 'What is the current state of research into knowledge management within the local government?' as well as the specific search terms employed to retrieve relevant literature for the study. The initial searches produced over a thousand results, which we filtered down to 109 articles from Scopus and 283 from Web of Science after applying a date range of 2010 to 2024. A further search in Google Scholar yielded 187 articles, bringing the total to 579 for screening. The PRISMA-P guidelines directed the review and data extraction (Moher et al. 2015).

For the screening, the results from Google Scholar, Scopus and Web of Science were uploaded to Covidence. This made it easier to manage the review process and allowed for smooth screening and data extraction. Covidence has an option to download a PRISMA flow chart. A manual screening of Google Scholar results was conducted to ensure a clear approach for completing the systematic review.

The study selection followed PRISMA-P guidelines and involved multiple screening stages using Covidence software:

- Stage 1: A total of 579 files were uploaded to Covidence for screening. The system automatically removed 139 articles, and we manually excluded 47 duplicates, leaving 393 files for the next step.
- Stage 2: During the title and abstract screening of the 393 studies, we excluded 317 for various reasons, such as not fitting the research aim, language problems or unsuitable methods. This left 76 studies for full-text screening.
- Stage 3: The 76 studies underwent a full-text eligibility assessment. We excluded 29 because of unavailable texts (13), language barriers (6), inappropriate settings (10) or citation issues. This left 47 studies that met the inclusion criteria.
- Stage 4: The review was based on the 47 studies, and we planned the next step for data extraction.
- Stage 5: Data extraction for the remaining 47 studies was handled by Covidence, which automatically uploaded some studies online while we manually added others. We created a custom data extraction template to gather the necessary information from each article.

Box 1 provides the inclusion and exclusion criteria used to retrieve articles used in the study. The selection of inclusion and exclusion criteria is a critical aspect of any systematic review, as it ensures methodological consistency and enhances the transparency and reproducibility of the research process. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed to ensure the relevance, quality and transparency of the systematic review. Studies published between 2010 and 2024 were selected to capture contemporary developments in KM within the local government. Only English-language publications with clear research questions, identifiable authors and accessible full texts were included to maintain consistency and credibility. It was also limited to studies focusing on KM processes within local government contexts, aligning with the review's thematic scope. The exclusion criteria filtered out publications with irrelevant titles or abstracts, missing author information, inaccessible full texts or written in languages other than English.

Data extraction process

Data extraction is crucial for conducting a systematic review. It involves collecting relevant data from primary studies that meet specific inclusion criteria. The aim is to identify and synthesise key findings to answer the research questions. After screening, we created a data extraction form to organise information from the selected studies according to predefined categories. Covidence provides a template for data extraction and quality assessment, which can be exported after completion. The form captures study characteristics, participant details, intervention information, outcome measures and results.

The extraction form includes categories such as the article's title, publication details, keywords, abstract and key conclusions. Including the publication date was important because the search for articles was limited to a specific timeframe.

BOX 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion	Exclusion
Published between 2010 and 2024	Research method
Published in English	Language, not English
Journal articles	Author not specified
Availability of full-text articles	Subject area not relevant to the study
KM in local government	The title and abstract are not relevant to the study
Knowledge management processes	
The research question/purpose is clearly stated	

KM, knowledge management.

Risk of bias

Petticrew and Roberts (2006) describe systematic reviews as literature that follows strict methods to reduce bias. They aim to identify and synthesise all relevant studies for specific research questions. Somekh and Lewin (2011) explain that bias is a tendency that affects data interpretation. They argue that researchers should either remove bias or recognise it through reflection. In this study, the primary author conducted the literature screening and data extraction, which introduces potential subjective bias. This means that personal beliefs or preferences could influence data selection and interpretation, potentially undermining objectivity and reliability.

Borenstein et al. (2009) suggest that while bias might slightly affect effect sizes, key findings can remain the same even if one author conducts the entire process. Publication bias was a concern because of the limited number of relevant studies available. However, the search strategy used aimed to reduce bias in article selection and provided insights for future research in this area.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using Covidence software, which streamlined the screening and data extraction for the 47 articles reviewed. This software enabled the careful collection of important information, such as titles, abstracts and key conclusions, improving the transparency and rigour of the systematic review. The analysis process was documented in detail, ensuring reproducibility with de-identified data and analysis code available upon request. The researcher acknowledges the potential for subjective bias during data analysis, as individual responsibility for literature screening and data extraction may influence results; however, this impact is seen as minimal. To address publication bias, a thorough search strategy was used, highlighting the need for further research in this area.

The review combined qualitative and quantitative methods. Thematic analysis identified patterns in qualitative data, while content analysis categorised and quantified textual data related to KM practices. A narrative synthesis summarised findings across studies, giving an overview of KM in local government.

Descriptive statistics outlined the characteristics of the quantitative data, supported by tables and figures in Online Appendix 1. A quality assessment of the 47 articles was performed using standardised tools such as the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklists, ensuring that only studies with sufficient methodological quality were included in the final analysis. This refers to studies that demonstrated clear research objectives, appropriate study design, valid data collection and analysis methods, transparency in reporting and relevance to the research questions. Studies were excluded if they lacked clarity in their methodology, failed to justify their analytical approach or presented insufficient evidence to support their conclusions. This thorough approach helped identify recurring themes and implications related to knowledge management in local government.

Critical appraisal skills programme systematic review checklist

- Focused Question: The main research question, 'What is the state of research into knowledge management within local government?' is broad. Sub-questions focus on KM practices, barriers, impacts and technology.
- Correct Papers: Inclusion criteria are clearly defined. They emphasise publication date, language, study setting and relevance to KM in local government, along with clear exclusion criteria mentioned in Box 1.
- Essential Studies: The search was thorough but could be improved by including grey literature and non-English studies.
- Quality Assessment: The review used the CASP checklist for assessing quality and acknowledged potential biases.
- Results Overview: The findings are summarised thematically. They address each research question and highlight main themes.
- Applicability: The range of geographical studies improves applicability, but local contexts need consideration.
- Outcomes Considered: The review covers various KM-related outcomes, but the negative effects of KM implementation need more exploration.
- Policy Implications: The insights into KM practices can lead to changes in policy and practice, highlighting best practices and barriers.

The methodology for conducting a systematic literature review on knowledge management in local government is based on secondary data analysis and follows a seven-step process outlined by Petticrew and Roberts (2006). Using the PRISMA-P checklist helps ensure quality and transparency. The data collection involved sampling from Web of Science, Scopus and Google Scholar, focusing on studies published between 2010 and 2024 and using specific search terms.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria (Box 1) guided the selection of studies, with the Covidence platform facilitating efficient screening and organisation. A mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, including thematic and content analysis, was used to analyse the data and identify trends. While the study recognises potential bias from a single researcher, steps were taken to reduce this risk.

This methodology provides a solid framework for reviewing knowledge management in local government. It aims to offer valuable insights and highlight areas for future research.

Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies involving humans or animals performed by any of the authors.

Results

The local government has challenges in adopting KM, a relatively new practice that is essential for improving service delivery and organisational performance. Active knowledge sharing among municipal employees is important, but office politics often disrupt this process, which harms the communities served. Many academic sources support using descriptive analysis in systematic literature reviews. Cooper et al. (2019) emphasise its importance in summarising studies, while Page et al. (2021) point out the value of visual data representations. Thematic analysis is suitable for qualitative data, and content analysis works well for quantitative data, with guidance from Braun and Clarke (2006) and Krippendorff (2018).

This is a summary of the systematic review on knowledge management in local government. It covers common knowledge management practices, barriers and enablers to implementation, and the impact of knowledge management on service delivery. The analysis used both qualitative and quantitative methods and focused on key themes from 47 well-conducted articles that met strict criteria. The findings give a clear picture of the current state of KM in local government.

Descriptive statistics of included studies

The literature review on knowledge management in local government examined 47 articles that met specific criteria for inclusion. The descriptive statistics offer insights into the different characteristics and distribution of research in this area.

Publication distribution

The 47 selected articles were shared across 42 respected scholarly journals, showing the interdisciplinary importance of KM. Notable journals include *VINE Journal*, the *Journal of Knowledge Management, Knowledge and Process Management*, and the *Journal of Information & Knowledge Management*, each contributing several articles to this research area. In contrast, other journals in the analysis each provided only one article, highlighting the different levels of involvement with KM in academic literature.

Publication year

The studies cover the years from 2010 to 2024, showing a significant rise in the number of publications in recent years, especially in 2023. This increase reflects a growing interest in KM within local government sectors. However, there are notable gaps, including no publications in 2022, suggesting possible disruptions in research activity or changes in scholarly focus during that time.

Geographical distribution

The research comes from 19 different countries across six continents, demonstrating KM's global relevance within various governance systems. South Africa and Iran stood out as significant contributors, leading in the amount of research produced. This worldwide distribution highlights differences in regional research output, which may point to varying governmental priorities, research capabilities or socio-economic factors affecting KM practices.

Research methods

The review mainly used qualitative methods, focusing on thematic analysis to gather insights from textual data. Content analysis was applied to measure specific KM practices and challenges faced by local governments, while narrative synthesis helped create a complete understanding of the findings. The use of Covidence software made data extraction and organisation easier, supporting the thoroughness of the review. Additionally, evaluations using the CASP checklists ensured the quality and trustworthiness of the research methods used.

Study settings

The studies looked at KM in a variety of local government bodies, including municipalities, counties and sub-national administrative divisions. These bodies were examined within different socio-economic and cultural contexts, showcasing the flexible nature of KM practices. The range of stakeholders involved included elected officials, administrative staff, support teams and citizens, highlighting the collaborative approach that defines effective KM implementation in public governance.

Presentation of key findings

Knowledge management processes and practices

Effective KM implementation is crucial and needs support from leadership, a positive culture and technology. Knowledge management maturity frameworks help assess progress. Measuring KM effectiveness is complex and requires models that capture both tangible and intangible outcomes. Knowledge management improves planning, digitalisation and service delivery. Key practices include knowledge-sharing platforms, communities of practice, repositories and training programmes.

Factors influencing knowledge management

Employee engagement is vital. Perceptions of KM can vary based on individual traits and the organisational culture. Leadership commitment and resource allocation are essential. Barriers include resistance to change, limited resources and siloed information. Technology and supportive environments aid in adopting KM.

Impact of knowledge management

Knowledge management boosts service delivery, decision-making, efficiency and innovation. It also improves customer satisfaction and the overall image of the organisation. Studies show that KM leads to better resource usage and builds trust among citizens. Research by

(LGSETA 2023) and the Institute for Local Government supports these findings.

Knowledge sharing and transfer

A culture of trust and collaboration is crucial for sharing knowledge. Both formal and informal methods help facilitate knowledge exchange. Transferring tacit knowledge is challenging but necessary for continuity and informed decision-making. Encouraging knowledge exchange between municipalities and communities is essential.

Knowledge management and technology

Technology supports KM with tools such as repositories, intranets and social media. It helps with integration, breaking down silos and encouraging collaboration. Digitalisation offers both opportunities and challenges, particularly in developing regions with infrastructure issues. Investment, training and security are essential to make the most of digital KM benefits.

Knowledge management and organisational performance

Knowledge management supports strategic goals, improves urban governance and encourages organisational learning. It aids in policy development, transparency and citizen engagement. Key themes include:

- Knowledge Risk Management: Protecting critical knowledge assets.
- Succession Planning: Ensuring continuity through the transfer of tacit knowledge.
- Sustainability: Supporting environmental, social and economic initiatives.

The review shows that KM in local government is growing, but still lacks enough research. Identified themes highlight KM's potential to tackle service delivery issues and enhance organisational performance. Although progress is visible, especially in countries such as South Africa and Iran, more research is required to bridge gaps and guide effective KM implementation. The findings highlight KM's strategic importance and provide practical insights for policymakers, practitioners and researchers.

Discussion

Interpretation of findings and comparison with literature

The systematic review shows that KM in local government is both promising and complex. While there is increasing adoption of KM practices such as knowledge creation, capture, storage and sharing, challenges remain, especially in building a culture of collaboration and overcoming resistance to change. This review confirms that effective KM improves decision-making, service delivery and organisational efficiency, consistent with established literature (e.g. Bouthillier & Shearer 2002; White & Riley 2011).

The findings stress the need to integrate KM into key municipal processes instead of treating it as a separate initiative. Leadership, organisational culture and employee engagement are crucial enablers which align with earlier studies (Al-Habil et al. 2016; Ncoyini 2020). However, measuring the effectiveness of KM remains difficult because of its intangible nature.

The review also points out the role of technology, including KM systems, intranets and digital platforms, as vital tools for enabling knowledge sharing and collaboration. However, successful implementation relies on alignment with organisational goals and proper training. The relationship between KM and organisational performance is complex and requires further investigation of mediating factors.

Comparison with existing literature

A comparative analysis of the review findings with existing literature shows strong alignment across key themes:

- KM practices: The review confirms the use of knowledge-sharing platforms, communities of practice and repositories, while emphasising the need for tailored approaches.
- Enablers and barriers: In line with the literature, barriers include resistance to change and limited resources, while enablers include leadership and culture. The review adds depth by highlighting the importance of technology infrastructure.
- Impact on service delivery: Knowledge management enhances service quality, decision-making and innovation, echoing findings from Mothamaha and Govender (2014).
- Knowledge sharing: The review builds on existing studies by outlining formal and informal mechanisms and underscoring the importance of trust and openness.
- Technology: The significant role of digitalisation and emerging technologies is highlighted, extending previous work (Kamal 2011).
- Organisational performance: The review looks at broader performance metrics, including strategic alignment and citizen satisfaction.

This analysis places the study within ongoing KM discussions. It offers a complete and process-oriented view that encourages embedding KM in strategic functions such as urban planning and digitalisation.

Implications for theory and practice

The review contributes to KM theory by identifying interconnected themes – culture, technology, leadership and citizen engagement – as foundational elements. It provides a framework for future research and practical guidance for municipal officials. Practically, the findings promote flexible KM strategies that adapt to technological changes and organisational needs. Local governments should nurture a learning culture, invest in technology, and encourage leadership and employee engagement to achieve KM's full potential.

Addressing research questions

RQ1: What are the most common knowledge management practices adopted by local authorities?

The results show that local governments use various knowledge management practices, foremost among these are knowledge-sharing platforms, communities of practice, centralised knowledge repositories and structured training programmes. When it comes to knowledge-sharing platforms, various digital tools help staff exchange information and collaborate with each other. Communities of practice, in turn, create the informal social networks that encourage the sharing of information among people with similar interests. Knowledge repositories serve as the central databases that organise information for easy access and reuse by employees. Lastly, training programmes provide employees with the skills needed to participate effectively in a knowledge-intensive environment.

RQ2: What are the key barriers to and enablers of effective knowledge management in the local government context?

Barriers to KM implementation include various related challenges impeding successful adoption. Resistance to change occurs when employees hesitate to adopt new practices or technologies for a variety of reasons. A lack of resources presents another significant obstacle, because limited funding, staffing or infrastructure may hinder KM efforts and prevent sufficient investment in the necessary systems or training. An obstructive organisational culture can create barriers too, for instance, when a non-collaborative culture undermines knowledge sharing and maintains a traditional silo mentality.

Enablers of KM include factors that facilitate successful implementation and support KM practices. Foremost among these is leadership support in the form of commitment from leaders that is important for creating a supportive KM environment, as well as for the allocation of the necessary resources. Employee engagement encourages participation and ownership in KM initiatives, which improves success rates and provides momentum. Technology infrastructure provides the material support for KM.

RQ3: How does knowledge management impact local government service delivery and organisational performance?

Effective KM practices improve local government performance and, by extension, service delivery through multiple enhancements. Improving service quality occurs when using knowledge leads to better responsiveness and satisfaction for citizens receiving municipal services. Enhanced decision-making happens when access to timely information helps with informed policymaking and planning. Increased efficiency results from streamlining processes that cut down duplication and optimise resources between departments and across service areas. Lastly, innovation is fostered when KM builds a culture of learning and experimentation. Together, these improvements resulting from KM practices can strengthen the overall capacity of local governments to serve their communities.

RQ4: What are the best practices and strategies identified for knowledge management in local government?

Key best practices include cultivating a knowledge-sharing culture by promoting an environment that values collaboration through recognition and communities of practice. Also important is securing leadership commitment, because involvement from leaders is crucial for successful KM integration. Investing in technology ensures material support for KM practices through the appropriate technology infrastructure. Additionally, providing training and support to give employees the necessary skills through ongoing training programmes that ensure that they can participate effectively in KM activities.

RQ5: What gaps or areas for improvement have been identified in the current research on knowledge management in local government, and what should be explored in future research?

Identified gaps for future research include several areas for investigation. The role of emerging technologies (such as AI and ML) and the opportunities they might offer for improving knowledge capture, processing and sharing in local government holds a lot of promise. Knowledge management in crisis situations is another under-researched area, and examining KM's effectiveness during emergencies such as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic might teach us a lot about how KM systems should be designed for resilience and coordination in crisis situations. Lastly, KM for diverse communities needs more research attention, especially with a focus on adapting KM practices to meet the needs of different populations and promote inclusivity in knowledge sharing and integration processes. Addressing these gaps can improve KM in local government, enhancing performance, service delivery and citizen satisfaction while ensuring that KM serve the entire community.

Limitations of the review

The review is limited by its focus on English-language publications, which may exclude diverse cultural insights. Grey literature and non-indexed studies may have been overlooked, and reliance on secondary data restricts practical understanding. Standardised evaluation tools may not capture the nuanced methodological quality, and the lack of direct observations limits the applicability of findings.

Recommendations for future research

- Investigate the integration of emerging technologies in KM.
- Explore KM strategies during crises and emergencies.
- Tailor KM practices for culturally diverse communities.
- Develop complete key performance indicators (KPIs) and evaluation frameworks.
- Conduct longitudinal studies to assess KM's long-term impact.

This discussion highlights KM's strategic role in local government. By addressing organisational culture, leadership, technology and stakeholder engagement, KM can improve governance and service delivery. The review answers all research questions and provides a plan for future research and practical implementation. Ultimately, KM enables local governments to respond effectively to complex challenges and create resilient, citizen-focused institutions.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the current state of KM research in local government. It focused on identifying gaps and opportunities for improvement, particularly in developing countries. The findings indicate that KM has significant potential to address ongoing issues in local governance, including corruption, poor service delivery and political interference. It does this by promoting transparency, accountability and community participation.

Summary of key findings

The systematic literature review provided several important insights: firstly, about the importance of structured KM implementation. Effective KM needs strategic planning, leadership support and a culture that encourages it. Secondly, regarding barriers to and enablers of KM, it seems that resistance to change, limited resources and a weak culture hinder KM, while strong technology infrastructure and support from leadership help KM to succeed. Thirdly, regarding impact on performance, KM enhances service delivery, improves organisational efficiency and increases citizen satisfaction. Fourthly, fostering a culture of knowledge sharing and methods for transferring knowledge are crucial, although capturing tacit knowledge remains difficult. Fifthly, new technologies such as AI and machine learning hold promise to improve KM capabilities. Finally, identified research gaps include the need for long-term studies, exploration of KM's role in engaging citizens and promoting sustainability, and the use of new technologies.

Connecting the dots: From start to finish

The study reaffirms the key role of KM in transforming local government operations. From the introduction's focus on the challenges municipalities face to the conclusion's push for structured KM adoption, the research presents a clear narrative. It supports the idea of incorporating KM into organisational processes, encouraging collaboration and using technology to improve service delivery and responsiveness.

The study also points out the lack of research in developing countries, where KM could play a vital role in addressing systemic governance issues. This reinforces the argument that KM is not just a theoretical idea but a practical tool for organisational change.

Contributions to knowledge

This review adds significantly to the KM literature by combining different KM practices and highlighting best practices in local government. The review emphasises the interactions between stakeholders and the importance of organisational culture, leadership and technology in successful knowledge management implementations. Additionally, it provides a basis for future research and practical application while identifying gaps in the body of knowledge, such as the need for long-term studies and research on KM's impact on sustainability and citizen involvement.

The review also offers useful insights for policy, presenting a model for decision-makers to guide KM implementation and resource allocation. In this way, academic research is connected to practical local government needs by giving guidance to municipal management seeking to improve effectiveness and service delivery through knowledge management.

Implications for local government practitioners and policymakers

The findings provide practical recommendations for strategic planning, cultural change, technology investment, performance evaluation and sustainability and succession planning. In terms of strategic planning, local governments should create KM strategies that match organisational goals, backed by leadership and sufficient resources. Cultural change requires the promotion of a culture of knowledge sharing through practices, recognition programmes and training. Technology investment involves introducing KM systems and tools, including AI and ML, to improve knowledge capture and use in municipal operations. Performance evaluation should incorporate the evaluation of existing KM initiatives with both numerical and descriptive measures to support ongoing improvement. Finally, sustainability and succession planning should use KM to further sustainability goals and ensure continuity through succession planning.

By following these strategies, local governments can improve service delivery, encourage innovation, and create more resilient and engaged communities. This study effectively examined the landscape of KM in local government, identifying key patterns, challenges and opportunities. It highlights the need for more focused research, especially through case studies that reveal the complexities of KM in different governance contexts. Ultimately, the findings give local governments a roadmap to utilise KM as a strategic resource, helping them navigate challenges, foster innovation and better serve their communities.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

K.G.M. developed the study, while C.H.M. supervised its execution by K.G.M.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, K.G.M., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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