Collaborative Governance and Integrated Service Delivery in South Africa: Lessons from Operation Sukuma Sakhe

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ARTICLE DETAILS

History

Received:
August 02, 2026

Revised:
October 02, 2026

Accepted:
October 20, 2026

Published:
November 01, 2026

Keywords

Operation Sukuma Sakhe
District Development Model
Collaborative Governance
Integrated Service Delivery
Developmental Governance

ABSTRACT

Purpose

Operation Sukuma Sakhe (OSS) is a KwaZulu-Natal community-centered governance initiative that coordinates government, municipal, civil society, and community responses to multidimensional household needs. This study examines historical OSS implementation and its potential relevance to South Africa's District Development Model (DDM), introduced in 2019. The proposed OSS–DDM relationship is an author-developed policy synthesis, not a participant-derived finding.

Methodology

An exploratory qualitative study involved eight purposively selected members of the OSS Provincial Task Team from different provincial government departments. Open-ended, in-depth interviews were conducted in isiZulu between September and December 2014. The researchers audio-recorded the interviews, transcribed them verbatim, and translated them into English; grounded-theory-informed open coding and constant comparison identified six overarching themes. A 2019 KwaDukuza municipal policy document provided contextual information on OSS structures, war-room functionality, and community participation, without substituting for contemporary primary data.

Findings

Officials identified six interrelated dimensions: shared governance philosophy, multilevel institutional functionality, perceived improvements in service access, community profiling, intersectoral partnerships, and community participation. However, they reported uneven war-room functionality, inconsistent departmental and community attendance, weak follow-up, and limited use of profiling data. These findings reflect officials' perceptions and do not independently establish community or beneficiary experiences.

Conclusion

Historical evidence suggests that OSS established a potentially valuable ward-to-provincial governance architecture for integrated service coordination. Its community-level mechanisms may complement the DDM's district-level planning architecture. However, because the DDM emerged after the fieldwork, this proposed relationship remains a contemporary authorial synthesis requiring validation through current, multilevel empirical research.

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1. Introduction

Complex social and health problems rarely conform to departmental boundaries. Poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, gender-based violence, chronic illness and unequal access to public services often converge within the same households and communities. This interdependence creates implementation problems that a single public institution cannot adequately address alone. Collaborative governance has therefore become an important approach to public problem-solving because it brings public agencies, communities and non-state actors into structured processes of joint decision-making and implementation (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012; Bryson et al., 2015). Research on public-sector networks similarly shows that outcomes depend not only on the creation of collaborative structures but also on how relationships, authority, accountability, and coordination are organized across participating institutions (Provan & Kenis, 2008; Turrini et al., 2010).

In South Africa, the constitutional commitment to cooperative government has long coexisted with persistent fragmentation among spheres of government, departments, and service-delivery systems. Integrated development planning seeks to create a common local planning platform, yet recent studies continue to identify weaknesses in coordination, public participation, institutional capacity, and translating plans into implementation (Mamokhere & Meyer, 2022, 2023; Ouwencamp & Van der Waldt, 2024). These challenges are particularly significant in provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal, where households may require simultaneous responses from health, social development, education, local government and other sectors.

Operation Sukuma Sakhe (OSS) emerged in KwaZulu-Natal as an institutional response to fragmented services. Interviewed provincial officials described coordinating structures at provincial, district, local and ward levels, including ward-based war rooms linking household needs with interdepartmental referrals. OSS therefore provides a case for examining the possibilities and constraints of integrated, place-based and community-oriented governance. Its significance lies in whether coordinating arrangements generate reliable information flows, intersectoral follow-up, community participation and accountability.

A central chronological consideration concerns the relationship between this article's empirical evidence and South Africa's later District Development Model (DDM). The interviews reported here were conducted between September and December 2014. In contrast, the DDM was introduced in 2019 as a place-based mechanism intended to improve coordination across the three spheres of government and reduce fragmented planning and implementation (Khambule, 2021; Teti et al., 2024). Participants, therefore, could not have discussed the DDM, and the historical findings cannot be interpreted as evidence of OSS-DDM integration. The DDM serves only as a contemporary policy context in which institutional lessons from the earlier OSS experience are reconsidered.

The article addresses a twofold problem. First, although OSS created a multi-level governance architecture for integrated service delivery, we still need to understand how provincial officials experienced its functioning, particularly the relationships among coordination structures, household profiling, intersectoral partnerships, community participation, and service follow-through. Second, recent DDM scholarship identifies ongoing challenges of coordination, institutionalization and implementation (Teti et al., 2024; Mutereko & Shava, 2024; Tafeni, 2024), but less attention has been paid to whether historical lessons from established ward- and household-level collaborative mechanisms,

such as OSS, can inform contemporary district-based governance. This article addresses that gap while maintaining a strict distinction between historical evidence and contemporary conceptual interpretation.

The study has three objectives: (1) to examine provincial officials' historical perspectives on how OSS functioned as an integrated governance mechanism; (2) to identify the strengths and implementation constraints they associated with coordination, profiling, partnerships, service access and community participation; and (3) to develop an author-derived conceptual interpretation of how selected OSS mechanisms might inform future empirical investigation of the DDM. The study asks: How did provincial OSS officials perceive OSS as a collaborative, integrated governance mechanism? What strengths and implementation constraints did they identify in relation to coordination, household profiling, intersectoral partnerships, and service access and community participation? What institutional lessons from the historical OSS experience can inform a conceptual framework for examining potential complementarities between ward-level collaborative governance and the contemporary DDM?

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews scholarship on integrated and collaborative governance, intergovernmental relations, OSS, community participation, household profiling, accountability and the DDM, and establishes the theoretical framework. Section 3 describes the qualitative design, sampling, data collection, analysis, trustworthiness, and ethics. Section 4 presents and interprets the six themes from the historical OSS interviews, then separates these findings from the contemporary OSS-DDM policy interpretation and conceptual framework. Section 5 concludes with policy and management implications, limitations and priorities for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Integrated and Collaborative Service Delivery in Complex Governance Systems

Integrated service delivery rests on the recognition that complex public problems arise from interacting social, economic, institutional, and spatial conditions. Fragmented responses can therefore reproduce gaps when agencies pursue separate mandates, information systems and performance targets without adequate mechanisms for joint action. Policy-integration scholarship distinguishes between simply combining policy instruments and developing arrangements that enable different interventions to operate coherently toward shared objectives (Cejudo & Michel, 2021). Systems thinking reaches a similar conclusion by emphasizing interdependence, feedback, and the risk that isolated interventions can shift problems rather than resolve those (Meadows, 2008).

Collaborative governance provides one institutional response to this problem. Ansell and Gash (2008) conceptualize it as a governing arrangement in which public agencies engage non-state stakeholders in collective decision-making. Emerson et al. (2012) broaden this perspective by situating collaboration within a systemic context shaped by principled engagement, shared motivation, and capacity for joint action. Bryson et al. (2015) similarly show that cross-sector collaboration requires attention to initial conditions, process design, leadership, governance structures and accountability. These contributions caution against treating collaboration as synonymous with meetings or formal coordination structures. The relevant question is whether collaborative arrangements enable actors to identify common problems, share information, make decisions, mobilize resources and implement agreed actions.

Network-governance research further demonstrates that effectiveness depends on the form and management of inter-organizational relationships. Provan and Kenis (2008) distinguish among alternative modes of network governance and argue that effectiveness depends in part on trust, network size, goal consensus, and the need for network-level competencies. Earlier empirical work by Provan and Milward (1995) showed that network structure can shape service-system effectiveness, while Turrini et al. (2010) synthesized evidence that network functioning depends on factors such as stability, management, integration, and external control. Hovik and Hanssen (2015) add that multi-level coordination becomes more difficult as networks increase in complexity. These insights are relevant to OSS because its architecture connected actors vertically across provincial, district, municipal and ward structures and horizontally across departments and community partners.

2.2. Collaborative Governance: Accountability, Performance and Institutional Capacity

More recent collaborative governance scholarship has moved beyond institutional design to examine accountability, performance, power, and implementation capacity. Lee and Ospina (2022) argue that collaborative accountability is process-based and depends on information production, opportunities for discussion, and the possibility of consequences. Cristofoli et al. (2022) similarly show that collaborative governance must negotiate tensions between legitimacy and accountability. These concerns matter especially in service-delivery systems where responsibility is distributed across organizations, but citizens ultimately experience government as a single service environment.

Collaboration also contains persistent paradoxes. Qi and Ran (2024) identify tensions such as autonomy versus interdependence, inclusion versus efficiency and flexibility versus institutional control. Christensen (2024) demonstrates that institutional design and leadership involve trade-offs among competing public values rather than a simple formula for success. Sullivan et al. (2024), reviewing research on mandated collaboration, likewise caution that formal requirements to collaborate do not necessarily generate genuine joint working. This distinction is central to OSS because some departments and stakeholders may be formally represented within structures without participating consistently or assuming responsibility for follow-through.

Therefore, the performance of collaborative arrangements must be assessed empirically. Douglas et al. (2020a) created a comparative case databank to enable systematic analysis of collaborative governance, while Douglas et al. (2020b) show that different combinations of conditions can lead to collaborative performance. Waardenburg et al. (2025) identify three recurring performance-management challenges: assessing substantive problem-solving, evaluating the collaborative process itself and managing multi-relational accountability. Zia ud Din et al. (2023) further demonstrate that institutional capacity can mediate the relationship between collaborative governance and public-service delivery. Together, this literature supports an analytical distinction between the architecture of collaboration and collaborative performance. OSS can therefore be examined not only by whether structures existed, but also by whether they enabled coordinated action, referral completion, accountability, and responsiveness.

2.3. Collaborative Regimes and the Evidence-to-Action Test

A further contribution comes from the collaborative governance regime approach, which treats collaboration as an enduring system of cross-boundary public decision-making rather than a temporary consultation exercise. Emerson and Nabatchi (2015a) argue that

collaborative regimes must be understood through the interaction between their wider system context, internal collaborative dynamics and the actions generated through collaboration. Their related performance framework distinguishes among outputs, outcomes, and adaptation, encouraging researchers to ask not only whether collaboration occurred but also what it produced and how it changed institutional behavior over time (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015b). This distinction matters for integrated service delivery. Attendance at coordinating meetings, the existence of referral forms or completion of household profiles are process indicators, but they cannot be assumed to represent service outcomes. More demanding indicators include whether responsibilities were assigned, referrals were completed, unresolved cases were escalated, and communities received feedback. When a ward-level structure identifies a problem but lacks authority, resources, or an effective escalation route, collaboration may generate information without driving action. Conversely, strong vertical connections can enable local evidence to influence decisions at the municipal, district or provincial level. For OSS, collaborative performance should therefore be understood as the capacity of interconnected structures to convert shared information and relationships into timely, traceable and accountable responses. This emphasis also supports the later comparison with the DDM, whose effectiveness similarly depends on whether coordination produces implementation rather than merely aligned planning documents.

2.4. Intergovernmental Relations and Integrated Governance in South Africa

South Africa's system of cooperative government requires national, provincial and local institutions to coordinate while retaining constitutionally defined responsibilities. In practice, integrated governance is difficult because departments and spheres operate through distinct budgets, accountability systems and planning cycles. These structural conditions can create duplication, gaps and weak alignment at the point of service delivery. The DDM was introduced partly in response to these persistent silos, aiming to create a shared district-level planning and implementation approach through a One Plan process (Khambule, 2021).

Emerging research suggests that the DDM has potential but should not be assumed to have resolved coordination challenges. Khambule (2021) discusses the DDM in relation to building a capable developmental local state and emphasizes the importance of local institutional capacity. Teti et al. (2024), examining the DDM as a catalyst for improved integrated development planning, identify coordination, communication and change-management issues that can constrain implementation. Mutereko and Shava (2024) similarly find that the model may strengthen shared services, but that institutionalization, awareness, expertise and resources remain important constraints. Tafeni (2024), focusing on implementation in the Eastern Cape, likewise evaluates whether the DDM has improved coordination and integration of support rather than assuming that formal adoption guarantees these outcomes.

These studies reinforce a broader governance principle: integrated planning is meaningful only when it produces integrated implementation. The existence of a district plan or coordinating structure does not, by itself, establish whether household needs are identified, assigned to responsible institutions, acted upon, monitored, and closed. This implementation concern creates a conceptual bridge to OSS, whose ward-based mechanisms were designed to connect local needs with multi-sectoral responses. However, that functional similarity must not be mistaken for empirical evidence of institutional integration between the two models.

2.5. Operation Sukuma Sakhe as a Collaborative Governance Model

The provincial officials interviewed in this study described OSS as a whole-of-government, community-oriented response to poverty, vulnerability and fragmented service delivery in KwaZulu-Natal. Their accounts identified provincial, district, local and ward coordinating arrangements, including war rooms intended to facilitate local coordination and community engagement. They also described household profiling as a means of identifying needs requiring cross-sector referral. These statements report participants' accounts of the OSS model rather than independently verified province-wide institutional performance.

From a collaborative governance perspective, OSS can be understood as an attempt to achieve both vertical and horizontal integration. Vertical integration linked ward-level structures with local, district, and provincial coordinating arrangements. Horizontal integration brought departments, municipalities, and community actors together to address multidimensional needs. This resembles the cross-boundary problem-solving described by Ansell and Gash (2008), Emerson et al. (2012) and Bryson et al. (2015). However, this architecture does not show that coordination was equally effective across all wards or institutions. The historical interview evidence is therefore important because it shows how provincial officials understood implementation strengths and weaknesses.

This distinction between institutional design and functioning matters in assessing war rooms. A war room may provide a platform for information sharing and referral, but its effectiveness depends on attendance, decision-making authority, record quality, escalation mechanisms, and follow-up. Collaborative governance research suggests that weak participation, uncertain accountability or insufficient capacity can reduce performance even when institutional structures are well designed (Lee & Ospina, 2022; Sullivan et al., 2024; Waardenburg et al., 2025). OSS should therefore be evaluated as a governance process rather than simply as an organizational structure.

2.6. Community Participation, Social Capital and Local Accountability

Community participation is central to developmental governance because integrated planning should reflect locally experienced needs and priorities. South African municipalities have formal participation mechanisms, but recent studies continue to show gaps between institutional provision and meaningful influence. Mamokhere and Meyer (2022) argue for mechanisms that include groups that remain marginalized in the IDP process, while Mamokhere and Meyer (2023) emphasize the importance of participation in improving the legitimacy and responsiveness of integrated development planning. Ouwencamp and Van der Waldt (2024) similarly propose stronger participation mechanisms across the IDP cycle. Mdluli et al. (2024), examining traditional leadership participation in Mhlathuze Local Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal, demonstrate that local participation occurs within complex institutional relationships rather than a simple state-citizen interface.

These findings are relevant to OSS because ward war rooms were intended to create a local interface between communities and government. Participation, however, should not be reduced to attendance. Meaningful participation requires access to information, opportunities to articulate priorities, influence over decisions, and institutional responsiveness and feedback on actions taken. Where citizens repeatedly provide information without visible follow-up, participatory mechanisms may lose credibility. Lee

and Ospina's (2022) accountability framework is useful here because it highlights information, discussion, and consequences as linked components of accountability.

Social Capital Theory provides an additional lens for interpreting these relationships. Putnam (2000) emphasizes networks, trust and norms of reciprocity as resources that can support collective action, while Woolcock (2001) distinguishes forms of social connection that link people within communities and across institutional boundaries. In OSS, bonding relationships may support local mobilization, whereas bridging and linking relationships are particularly important for connecting households and community structures to public institutions. Social capital is therefore relevant not as an assumption of community cohesion, but as a way to examine whether governance arrangements create trustworthy relationships through which information, influence, and resources can move.

2.7. Household Profiling and the Evidence-to-Action Gap

Household profiling can be valuable because integrated governance requires information on needs that cut across sectoral mandates. However, collecting information does not automatically improve service delivery. From a systems perspective, information produces value only when it enters a functioning feedback loop (Meadows, 2008). In practice, an evidence-to-action chain requires at least the identification of need, documentation, and referral, assignment of responsibility, institutional action, monitoring, feedback, and closure. Failure at any point can leave households repeatedly profiled without resolution.

This evidence-to-action perspective complements contemporary collaborative-performance research. Waardenburg et al. (2025) emphasize the difficulty of connecting collaborative processes to substantive problem-solving, while Zia ud Din et al. (2023) highlight the importance of institutional capacity for translating collaboration into public-service outcomes. Applied to OSS, the relevant analytical question is therefore not only whether profiling took place, but whether profiling data generated coordinated and traceable responses. This distinction also guards against over claiming: because the present sample consists of provincial officials rather than beneficiary households, the study can report officials' perceptions of profiling and follow-up but cannot independently verify household-level outcomes.

2.8. The District Development Model and Contemporary Integrated Governance

The DDM represents a contemporary attempt to organize government planning and implementation around districts and metropolitan spaces. Its place-based logic is intended to improve coherence among national, provincial and local government and to align planning, budgeting and implementation (Khambule, 2021; Teti et al., 2024). In principle, this creates an opportunity to connect district-level strategic planning with finer-grained evidence about community and household needs. However, the current literature suggests that successful integration depends on institutional capacity, role clarity, communication and sustained coordination (Khambule, 2021; Teti et al., 2024; Mutereko & Shava, 2024; Tafeni, 2024).

The comparison with OSS is therefore functional rather than historical. OSS developed ward- and household-facing mechanisms for profiling, referral and local coordination, whereas the DDM operates through a later district-based planning architecture. The two approaches address related problems of fragmentation but emerged in different periods and institutional contexts. The historical OSS interviews cannot establish whether OSS mechanisms currently function, whether they are connected to DDM processes, or whether

such integration would improve outcomes. Instead, they provide institutional lessons that can be translated into propositions for contemporary testing.

2.9. Historical OSS Lessons and the Contemporary DDM: Research Gap

Despite a growing literature on collaborative governance, public participation, integrated development planning and the DDM, an important empirical and conceptual gap remains. South African scholarship has examined participation in IDP processes (Mamokhere & Meyer, 2022, 2023; Ouwencamp & Van der Waldt, 2024), DDM implementation and integrated planning (Teti et al., 2024; Tafeni, 2024), and shared services under the DDM (Mutereko & Shava, 2024). International research has also developed increasingly sophisticated accounts of collaborative accountability, performance and institutional capacity (Cristofoli et al., 2022; Lee & Ospina, 2022; Qi & Ran, 2024; Waardenburg et al., 2025). Less attention has been given to whether lessons from established ward- and household-level collaborative governance arrangements can inform the implementation questions confronting district-based integrated governance in South Africa.

OSS provides a distinctive historical case because its institutional design sought to connect household profiling, community participation, intersectoral referral and ward-level coordination with municipal, district and provincial governance structures. The historical evidence analyzed here nevertheless predates the DDM and cannot establish either contemporary OSS functionality or OSS-DDM integration. This article therefore addresses not whether OSS and the DDM are already integrated, but which institutional lessons from the historical OSS experience warrant contemporary empirical testing within the DDM environment. This positioning lets historical evidence inform current governance debates without retrospectively attributing the DDM to participants interviewed before the model existed.

2.10. Theoretical Framework

The analysis integrates Social Capital Theory, Collaborative Governance Theory and Systems Thinking. Social capital focuses on trust, reciprocity, and relationships that connect community actors and institutions (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001). Collaborative governance explains how public and non-state actors organize principled engagement, shared motivation and capacity for joint action across institutional boundaries (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). Systems thinking focuses on interdependence, feedback loops and the consequences of weak connections between parts of a service-delivery system (Meadows, 2008).

Together, these perspectives enable analysis at three connected levels. Social capital helps interpret relationships and participation; collaborative governance helps assess institutional coordination, leadership and accountability; and systems thinking helps examine whether information and referrals travel through an effective evidence-to-action chain. The theories are applied only to the historical OSS evidence. They do not imply that participants theorized the later DDM. The contemporary OSS-DDM framework, developed later in the article, is an author-derived conceptual synthesis based on historical findings and subsequent policy literature.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Setting

A qualitative exploratory design was used to examine strategies through which OSS coordinated community services in KwaZulu-Natal. The province's OSS architecture included provincial, district, local, and ward-level structures, with ward war rooms intended as the main point where community needs and service responses converged.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

This article's empirical analysis is based on eight members of the OSS Provincial Task Team working in different provincial government departments. Participants were purposively selected for their direct involvement in OSS coordination. The sample, therefore, represents a single stakeholder level: provincial officials. It excludes community members, ward-level implementers, community caregivers, municipal frontline personnel, and service beneficiaries. The findings maintain this boundary explicitly throughout. Participants were purposively selected because of their direct knowledge of OSS governance and coordination. The study included the Provincial OSS Convenor, District OSS Convenor/Chair, and OSS Secretary in leadership and coordinating roles.

3.3. Data Collection

The eight in-depth interviews were conducted between September and December 2014. An open-ended interview guide explored OSS ideology and rationale, program functionality, collaboration, partnerships, community profiling, and participation. Interviews were conducted in isiZulu, audio-recorded, and lasted approximately one to two hours.

3.4. Translation and Data Analysis

The research assistant transcribed interviews verbatim and translated them into English. The available study documentation does not indicate that a separate back-translation or independent bilingual validation procedure was undertaken. This is acknowledged as a methodological limitation.

Analysis followed a grounded-theory-informed constant-comparative approach. We conducted open coding iteratively, comparing codes within and across interviews and clustering them into broader categories. Categories were refined until the analysis no longer generated substantively new categories within this small, focused dataset. Given the sample size and single-stakeholder level, this is described as analytic category sufficiency within the interviewed group rather than universal saturation across the OSS system. Six themes were retained because they consistently organized the provincial officials' accounts of OSS operation.

3.5. Trustworthiness

Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the interview material, iterative coding and constant comparison. We strengthened dependability by documenting analytic decisions, while confirmability was supported by distinguishing participant accounts from the authors' subsequent interpretations. The provincial-level sample and historical fieldwork period necessarily limit transferability; therefore, detailed contextual reporting is provided so readers can judge relevance to other settings.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The University of KwaZulu-Natal Biomedical Research Ethics Committee (BREC Ref. BE342/14) approved the original study. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant provincial authority. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained in the handling, analysis and reporting of the interview data.

3.7. Scope of Historical Evidence

The analysis relies on interviews conducted in 2014. Later scholarship on the District Development Model is considered separately as contemporary policy context, not as evidence from the original fieldwork or as verification of current OSS functionality.

4. Result and Discussion

Six themes organized the provincial officials' accounts. Because the sample excluded community members and beneficiaries, statements about service access, participation, and household experience reflect officials' perceptions rather than verified outcomes.

4.1. Shared Governance Philosophy

Participants described OSS as a mechanism for rebuilding collective responsibility around household vulnerability. The program was understood as bringing multiple actors into a shared space rather than leaving complex social problems to individual departments.

"OSS is there to create, rebuild that fibre of a community, make sure that we all look after each other in a community and have all to assist each other, so that is how OSS has been viewed and that is how it has been implemented, and until now OSS in some areas is working" (Interviewee 1).

"OSS exists to tackle three main areas", which are:
1) Empowerment of women and youth,
2) Poverty alleviation and
3) Prevention of social ills, including HIV/AIDS" (Interviewee 5).

These accounts show a governance philosophy centered on shared responsibility and interdependence. They also suggest that officials linked OSS to prevention and social determinants of health, not only to administrative coordination.

4.2. Governance Functionality Across Levels

Participants distinguished between ward war rooms, local task teams, district task teams and the provincial task team. The war room was described as the principal operational level, with higher levels expected to provide oversight and support.

"The 'war room' is where the activities take place, the other levels you can think of as kind of administration or management ... these activities must take place in a ward" (Interviewee 3).

However, officials reported uneven functionality. Some structures were active, while others were weakened by poor attendance and limited follow-through. These participant accounts identify variable functionality as an implementation issue that warrants contemporary investigation.

4.3. Perceived Access to Government Services

Provincial officials saw war rooms as mechanisms to bring departments closer to communities and strengthen referral pathways. One participant described the war room as a convergence point through which beneficiaries could be referred across departments.

"The OSS has introduced the 'war room,' a very convenient hub for all departments. Beneficiaries can now access the service within a day. They are no longer travelling distances to seek a service. All the government services are delivered where the people live" (Interviewee 1).

This is an official's account of perceived accessibility, not an independently measured service outcome. Participants also reported poor attendance by both departments and community members at some war rooms, which could reduce the accessibility benefits the model is attributed.

"Although 'war rooms' are situated in central venues within the communities, you can go to one or two 'war rooms' in each of the municipalities, and see if you will find the people. Both the government departments and the beneficiaries do not attend the meetings" (Interviewee 2).

4.4. Community Profiling and the Evidence-to-Action Gap

Officials described community caregivers and youth ambassadors as "foot soldiers" responsible for household profiling. Profiling was intended to identify demographic, health, social, and educational needs and direct them to relevant departments. Participants nevertheless identified a critical implementation gap between collecting information and *acting on it.*

"They will profile, profile and profile and then do not deliver. Houses will be visited, but there will be no follow-up intervention" (Interviewee 1).

This tension is central to the historical evidence's contemporary relevance. Community-level data matter only when governance systems can translate them into prioritization, referral, budgeting, implementation and follow-up. The interviews illustrate a perceived gap between collecting household information and acting on identified needs; they do not establish current performance.

4.5. Intersectoral Partnerships

Participants described OSS as a platform for cooperation among departments, social agencies, civil society and faith-based organizations. The perceived value of partnership was strongest among households that required several forms of support simultaneously.

"The Department of Health alone cannot deal with these burdens of diseases; we need almost all the departments, civic organizations, and communities to work together" (Interviewee 4).

"We are also working in partnership with churches as a way of addressing behavior change, we have motivational speakers too" (Interviewee 5).

These accounts align with collaborative governance theory: cross-sector arrangements can pool authority, knowledge, and resources, but their effectiveness depends on participation, role clarity, and accountability rather than on the mere existence of a forum (Bryson et al., 2015; Waardenburg et al., 2025).

4.6. Community Participation

Officials portrayed community participation as integral to the OSS model. Community leaders and members were described as attending war rooms to raise issues and hold departments accountable. At the same time, participants acknowledged weak participation in some locations.

"Sectors attending the "war room" which include civil society and the members of the community, including community leaders, they just walk in to voice or listen to the community issues, so the communities are not passive, they form part of the interactions and discussions" (Interviewee 2).

"OSS was established for community leaders to lead the communities and to account to the beneficiaries" (Interviewee 8).

Because community members were not interviewed, the study cannot determine whether they experienced these spaces as genuinely influential, inclusive or accountable. The finding is therefore best interpreted as evidence of the participatory design and officials' perceptions of its operation, not as proof of community empowerment.

4.7. Integrated Interpretation of the Historical Findings

The historical findings depict OSS as an attempt to institutionalize collaborative governance around household-level needs. Its distinctive feature was combining vertical governance structures with horizontal collaboration: ward war rooms connected community-level information and service coordination with local, district, and provincial task teams. In theoretical terms, this architecture brought together relational resources associated with social capital, institutional arrangements associated with collaborative governance, and cross-level interdependencies emphasized by systems thinking.

The findings also show why collaborative structures frequently underperform. Formal forums did not ensure attendance, follow-up or consistent functionality. This distinction between collaborative architecture and collaborative performance is important. Bryson et al. (2015) argue that cross-sector collaboration requires attention to process, structure, accountability and outcomes, while more recent work highlights the difficulty of performance management where responsibility is distributed across multiple organizations (Waardenburg et al., 2025). The OSS accounts illustrate these challenges in a provincial service-delivery setting.

A second contribution concerns the relationship between community-generated information and institutional action. Profiling was designed to make household needs visible, yet participants described situations in which information collection was not followed by service delivery. This evidence-to-action gap is more analytically important than the volume of data collected. A functioning integrated governance system requires a traceable chain from identifying need to referral, the responsible institution, action, feedback, and closure.

Third, the findings show the limits of concluding officials alone. Officials described war rooms as spaces where communities could voice concerns and hold departments accountable, but they also acknowledged non-attendance and uneven participation. The interpretation, therefore, avoids treating community participation as an established outcome. Contemporary research should directly include community members, frontline implementers and groups who may be excluded from formal participatory spaces.

4.8. Contemporary Policy Interpretation: Potential OSS Contribution to the DDM

The DDM was introduced five years after the 2014 interviews. Accordingly, the authors developed the following interpretation as a policy synthesis. It asks whether institutional mechanisms historically observed in OSS could help address contemporary implementation questions within the DDM; it does not claim that participants proposed such integration.

The DDM provides a strategic, place-based architecture for coordinating government around district priorities. OSS, by contrast, was designed around ward-level identification of household needs, referrals and local stakeholder interaction. Conceptually, the two operate at different but potentially complementary levels. If current empirical work confirms that OSS structures remain functional and legitimate, ward-level profiling and coordination could provide one source of local intelligence for district planning. In contrast, DDM structures could provide stronger routes for escalation, budgeting, intergovernmental coordination and accountability.

This proposition is consistent with current DDM research showing that integrated planning alone does not resolve coordination and implementation difficulties. For example, Teti et al. (2024) identify uncertainties in communication, coordination, and change management in DDM implementation. Historical OSS evidence suggests testing specific operational questions: whether ward structures can generate reliable local priorities; whether referrals can be tracked across departments; whether community participation influences planning; and whether district structures can close the loop between local evidence and resource allocation.

4.9. Proposed OSS-DDM Framework: An Author-Developed Conceptual Contribution

The proposed framework comprises five linked functions. First, community identification and participation: ward-level structures identify household and community priorities through participatory processes. Second, integrated referral and case coordination: needs are assigned to responsible sectors, with clear timelines and closure mechanisms. Third, evidence aggregation: ward-level information is synthesized into local and district patterns rather than remaining as isolated household records. Fourth, district planning and resource alignment: validated local evidence informs DDM priorities, budgets and intergovernmental commitments. Fifth, collaborative performance and feedback: district and sector actors report implementation progress back through local structures, enabling accountability and learning.

The framework should be treated as a proposition for empirical testing. Its feasibility depends on current OSS functionality, data governance, institutional mandates, digital interoperability, municipal capacity, political and administrative support, and the quality of community participation. These conditions cannot be established from the 2014 interviews.

5. Discussion

The study provides a historical account of how provincial officials understood OSS as an integrated governance mechanism. Officials described a shared philosophy of collective responsibility, a multi-level governance architecture, perceived improvements in service access, household profiling, intersectoral partnerships and community participation. They also reported uneven functionality, weak attendance, incomplete follow-up and an

evidence-to-action gap. These findings remain valuable as foundational evidence on the institutional design and implementation challenges of community-centered collaborative governance in KwaZulu-Natal.

A clear distinction is maintained between those empirical findings and the later DDM. The proposed OSS-DDM framework is not presented as having emerged from the 2014 participants. Instead, it is a contemporary conceptual proposition derived from the historical OSS interviews and post-2019 DDM scholarship. Its central proposition is that ward-level mechanisms for participation, profiling and referral could complement district-level integrated planning if their present functionality and legitimacy are demonstrated.

5.1. Policy and Management Recommendations

- Undertake a contemporary multi-level OSS study that includes community members, ward and municipal implementers, civil society, district officials and provincial actors before formalizing any OSS-DDM integration.
- Where OSS structures remain operational, strengthen referral tracking and collaborative accountability so that household needs can be followed from identification to action and closure.
- Audit the quality, governance, interoperability and actual planning use of household-profiling data before linking such information to DDM planning and budgeting.
- Test the proposed OSS-DDM framework in selected districts using implementation-science and mixed-methods approaches, with explicit indicators for participation, coordination, referral completion, responsiveness and equity.
- Protect community participation from becoming purely procedural by directly assessing whose voices are represented, how priorities influence decisions and whether feedback is provided to communities.

5.2. Limitations

This study has several important limitations. First, the empirical interviews were conducted in 2014 and therefore provide a historical account rather than a description of OSS's current operational state. Participants did not discuss the DDM, which was introduced in 2019. Consequently, the OSS-DDM framework is a later authorial policy synthesis rather than an empirical finding.

Second, the sample comprised only eight provincial task-team members. Community members, beneficiaries, municipal- and ward-level implementers, community caregivers, and civil society participants were not interviewed. Claims about access, participation, and community experience therefore rely on provincial officials' perceptions. Third, although the focused interviews generated recurring categories, the small single-level sample does not support claims of system-wide saturation. Fourth, the research assistant translated the interviews from isiZulu into English, and the available records do not document independent back-translation or bilingual validation; translation nuance may therefore have been lost.

Finally, governance arrangements may have changed substantially since the original fieldwork, including through subsequent policy reforms, administrative changes, the COVID-19 period and DDM implementation. Current multi-level research is required before making claims about present-day integration.

5.3. Future Research

Future research should conduct contemporary, multi-level, and preferably multi-site assessments of OSS in the DDM era. Such work should include community members, ward-level implementers, municipalities, district and provincial officials, civil society organizations, and other service partners. Mixed-methods and longitudinal designs could test the proposed OSS-DDM framework, examine whether household-level evidence influences district planning and budgeting, and assess implementation outcomes such as referral completion, responsiveness, participation, accountability and equity.

Author Contributions

The author(s) gratefully acknowledge Dr. Nelisiwe (Nelly) Khuzwayo for her contribution to the original research conducted under the University of KwaZulu-Natal Biomedical Research Ethics Committee-approved study (BREC Ref. BE342/14). The author(s) also sincerely appreciate the Operation Sukuma Sakhe (OSS) officials who participated in the study, particularly those serving in key OSS leadership and coordination roles, including the Provincial OSS Convenor, District OSS Convenor/Chair, and OSS Secretary. Their time, institutional knowledge, experiences, and perspectives provided valuable insights into OSS governance, coordination, and implementation.

Funding

The author received no external funding

Conflicts of Interest

No conflict of interest

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