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Local Government: A Social Ontology of Care

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Abstract: Setting out to determine what ‘local government’ is and how it can be understood, I conducted an analysis of the concept ‘local government’ by identifying its institutional, behavioural and territorial attributes. This analysis informed an ontological description of the nature of local government and the underlying assumptions about this reality. Ontological, local government, as a collection of ‘Dasein’ with an immanent tension between anxiety and care, may simultaneously be viewed as being a social collective of individuals, an institution consisting of individuals, and a social action or intervention performed by caring individuals. The description of the nature of local government provides a point of departure for describing and comparing this reality as situated in different contexts. It also serves as a proposed menu for the questioning and challenging of underlying assumptions about local government. The value of this social ontology of care lies in the description of the nature of the reality of local government situated in different contexts. Furthermore, it serves as an agenda for questioning and challenging the underlying assumptions about local government within different contexts.

Keywords: care, local government, social ontology, social ontology of care, concept analysis, local government functions, jurisdiction sphere, local government institutions, Dasein

1. Introduction

The day-to-day well-being of people worldwide is affected in dissimilar ways and intensity by local governments. In some countries, residents are barely aware of this sphere of government, while in other countries, they live through vivid experiences of good or bad local government. In response to ‘bad’ local government, governments conceptualise and implement interventions to address a diversity of local government challenges. Public Administration scholars continually ask questions about, amongst others, aspects of good or bad local government and remedies for the latter. The answers to these questions inform diverse and multiple studies resulting in abundant research publications. These research publications enlighten our scholarly understanding of the public administration reality and practitioners’ decisions and interventions towards good local government. If all these studies and publications respond to quests for meaningful

knowledge about local government or a specific aspect of it, the vexing question is: What is 'local government', and how can it be understood?

At first, these questions may appear to be irrelevant, as everybody is supposed to know what 'local government' is. Nevertheless, questions like these are important considering that both the concept 'local government' and the reality to which it refers comprises human constructions within diverse contexts, with possible dissimilar characteristics. The relevance of these questions is evident from

- studies of the practice ontologies of local government (Dobson, 2020)
- the semantic representation of the local government strategic planning process (Zarić et al., 2023)
- Barnett and co-authors' contribution on the study of 'actually existing' practice (Barnett et al., 2020, p. 505)
- the social ontology of purpose (Martela, 2023; Morrison & Mota, 2023a)

As an ontology is expected to provide semantic descriptions of a specific phenomenon (such as local government), the conceptual study on which this article reports, aimed to develop a social ontology of local government.

The current study was directed by the following ontological questions:

- What is 'local government'?
- How does the reality to which the concept refers, present itself?
- How can it be described semantically?

This article departs from an exposition of the concept 'social ontology' and the theories-of-being relevant to the study of local government. This is followed by an analysis of the concept 'local government' by identifying some key attributes, antecedents, and implied outcomes through a systematised review of selected scholarly literature as well as official documents. Derived from this concept analysis and considering some empirical referents, a framework for a universal social ontology of local government is proposed. The notion of social ontology is discussed next.

2. The notion 'social ontology'

What makes an exposition of the notion 'social ontology' necessary for studying and understanding local government? While the word 'ontology' is used to refer to "the study of being" (see Illing, 2010, p. 284; Mouton & Marais, 1996, p. 11; Moyo, 2017, p. 288; Scruton, 2007, p. 492), the concept also refers to the study and questioning of – in the words of the English political philosopher Rodger Scruton – "the underlying assumptions about reality, especially social reality, that are made in some given outlook" (2007, p. 492). The implication is that, while there may be various views on and assumptions about a social reality, there is only one social reality (O'Keeffe, 2020, p. 25).

Several Public Administration scholars have explored ontology as theories of existence. Departing from the assumption that government is a human creation which can only

be fully understood through a social ontology, Raadschelders (2020, p. 47) postulates “a social ontology for understanding government in society” which entails an “interplay of human instinct and intent in relation to the material world in which people live” (Raadschelders, 2020, p. 59). Furthermore, Raadschelders (2020) argues for an “ontology of government that involves a discussion of what government is and could/should be” and for a cross-time perspective and a societal context awareness (Raadschelders, 2019, p. 100). For Stout and Staton (2011, p. 269), an ontology is “the broadest philosophical foundation for theory in that it describes understandings of reality and the nature of existence ... [and] frames presuppositions about all aspects of life, including the social and political”.

Searle, one of the founding contributors to the discourse on social ontology, holds that social and political institutions, such as marriage, money, property and governments are all human constructed (Searle, 2006; Searle, 2010). There is therefore a need for a social ontology “to understand the nature of the social world” (Epstein, 2016, p. 149) and, by implication, government in society. This understanding is enhanced through a semantic description of government in society (Zarić et al., 2023, pp. 1, 3). The value of social ontologies of local government has been demonstrated by, amongst others, Dobson (2020) and Zarić et al. (2023). The latter contribution reports on ontology-driven simulation methods within the context of the local government strategic planning process (Zarić et al., 2023).

The implication of the human nature of local government as institution is its inherent indeterminacy. This characteristic entails the restrictions for the attainment of truth about this reality, with implications for the epistemic imperative and the ideals of rationality and objectivity (Mouton, 2014, p. 100). It is therefore expected that a social ontology could enhance our understanding of a social reality, such as local government, through a meticulous semantic description and framing of its socially constructed and interconnected characteristics, functions and behaviour (Searle, 2006; Wessels, 2023, p. 26). While the concept ‘local government’ may be embodied by its constituting institutions or organisations, groups or communities, individual representatives and officials, interventions, social actions or events and social artefacts, such as reports and publications (Wessels, 2021, p. 437), it can be observed (cross-time and contextual) through the characteristic dimensions of its state of being (static or dynamic), its orientation or expression, and its behaviour. Local government therefore necessitates a social ontology as foundation for an extended epistemology and comprehensive ways of knowing this reality.

In my search for an appropriate theoretical lens to understand the social ontology of local government, I have stumbled upon the English translation of the seminal work of the German Philosopher Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (1927), namely *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962). While I first expected a social ontology to provide a semantic description of a given social reality (see Zarić et al., 2023, p. 1), Heidegger (1962, p. 31) made me aware of the imperative of clarifying “the meaning of Being” as the fundamental task of a social ontology. To obtain relative clarity on the meaning of the concept ‘local government’ referring to a specific reality, an analysis of the concept was done. The design for the concept analysis is discussed next.

3. Research design

As indicated in the introduction, the purpose of this study was to formulate a social ontology for understanding and describing local government. For this purpose, a concept analysis was selected as a research design for determining the key attributes, antecedents and consequences (outcomes) of the concept 'local government'. Wilson's (1963) seminal work, *Thinking with Concepts*, resulted in a widely used research design and applied method for concept analysis in a variety of disciplines (see Brons, 2005, p. 52). Walker and Avant's (2014, pp. 161–185) adaptation of Wilson's design and method became broadly used by scholars, especially in the Nursing Sciences, but also in other social and human sciences (Brons, 2005, p. 57; Cronin et al., 2010, p. 66). I used an adapted and shortened version of Walker and Avant's (2014) method for the current study.

As the concept 'local government' is used for referring to specific realities within the broad domains of the state, public administration and the study thereof, a review of both the relevant founding documents (such as the constitutions, statutes and policies) and scholarship is imperative for a comprehensive understanding of the concept. The benefit of starting with founding documents is that these documents contain the exact legal descriptions of the concept under discussion and its attributes.

The second part of the review focused on scholarship. The scholarship was identified by searching the Scopus database in the broad subject areas of social sciences and business studies. To limit the study to the most current scholarly applications of the concept, the search was narrowed to articles published in the last ten years, namely the period 2013–2023. Furthermore, it was confined to the title field of the respective records, using the search terms Local gov* OR municip*, AND servi* OR function*. The search resulted in 620 records. After scanning through the titles and abstracts of all the records, duplicates and not applicable records (records not about local government or municipalities) were removed, reducing the total number to 167. To ensure the inclusion of South African specific applications of the concept, a similar search was done in the database of the *Journal of Public Administration*, a South African (SA) journal not included in the Scopus database, resulting in an additional six records. A total of 173 records from 114 different journals were eventually analysed.

The qualitative content analysis of primarily the titles and abstracts of articles aimed to identify the various uses of the concept, as well as the empirical referents for the key attributes, antecedents and expected outcomes or consequences. Where the titles and abstracts provided insufficient information, the full texts were read. Despite the wide range of scholarly records and mostly SA-specific founding documents consulted for my study, the purpose of the study was not, in the words of Searle (2006, p. 26), to offer "a general empirical hypothesis" of local government, but to do a concept analysis for developing a conceptual framework for a social ontology of local government. In designing this concept analysis, I was guided by Searle's distinction between "empirical generalisations and conceptual analysis" (2006, p. 26). I therefore used the official documents and scholarly literature to inform my understanding of local government.

4. A concept analysis of ‘local government’

For the sake of meaningful communication while using the concept ‘local government’, clarity about its meaning and the realities to which it refers is necessary. Following the research design outlined above, this section reports on the uses of the concept ‘local government’, its defining attributes, consequences or outcomes of the concept, and empirical referents of it. A visual representation of the components of the concept analysis is provided in Figure 1.

4.1. The uses of the concept ‘local government’

The purpose of this subsection is to identify various applications of the concept as validation for my ultimate choices of key attributes of the concept. Local government as an emerging social construction and legacy of the Roman Empire (ad 110–112) developed over time in different contexts with an emphasis on the ‘local’ dimension of the economy, realities, problems, communities as parts of larger and shifting groups, regions named to approximate localities, laws and customs, elites, rulers, magistrates and autonomy (see Bispham et al., 2006). While the local dimension of life and government was an integral part of the development of the Roman Empire, the autonomy of local government was initially limited (Bispham et al., 2006). More recent evidence of the existence of local government can be found in the proceedings of a British Parliamentary debate in 1834. In a debate on the Poor Laws Amendment Bill, the advantages of the uniformity of centralised power versus localised powers, the Whig economist,¹ Colonel Robert Torrens, referred to “a good system of local government [...] looked upon to be the perfection of all government” (House of Commons, 1834, p. 1340). He argued, “the local authorities of the country should have their powers as little infringed upon as possible” (House of Commons, 1834, p. 1340). The emergence of the concept ‘local government’ within the context of the state was found to be characterised by the differing dimensions of localness of communities, and the autonomy or jurisdiction of authorities.

How can one define ‘local government’? Let us start with general dictionary definitions. According to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (2007), ‘local government’ is “the administration of the affairs of a town, county, etc., by the elected representatives of those who live in it, as [opposed] to administration by the Government”. In a related formulation, the *Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Political Thought* defines the concept as referring to “[a] public organization authorized to decide and administer a limited range of public policies pertaining to a circumscribed territory within a larger and sovereign jurisdiction” (Scruton, 2007, p. 402).

¹ The Whigs “were a faction of Protestant noblemen, united in opposition to Toryism, as it then was. However, because of their parliamentary leanings, they gradually became identified with the more liberal movements in English politics and, during the course of the eighteenth century, brought about the realignment of parliamentary forces which permitted the emergence of the UK Liberal Party” (Scruton, 2007, p. 735).

It is noteworthy that purposeful definitions of the concept are rare in the scholarship analysed for this study. Within the context of Nepal, ‘local government’ is understood through its actions of “delivering [...] services at the local level as closest unit of the citizens” (Acharya & Scott, 2022, p. 64). In the case of the United States of America, ‘local government’ refers to, in the words of Shi (2018, p. 531), “general-purpose governments, such as counties and municipalities”. In Germany, ‘local government’ means “de facto the third layer of government [with] a high political and functional status” (Guderjan, 2015, p. 939–940). The above applications of the concept seem to emphasise the actions, institution types, and authorised sphere of jurisdiction of a local government.

While the Australian version of local government does not have constitutional recognition (Ollerenshaw et al., 2017, p. 295), the SA version is quite the opposite. Local government as social construct within the SA context is grounded in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa [RSA] of 1996 (RSA, 1996) while a variety of acts (RSA, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 2000, 2003) provide detailed specifications for the particular reality. The SA Constitution refers to the “local sphere of government” consisting of “municipalities, which must be established for the whole of the territory of the Republic”, as well as to the authority and rights of Municipal Councils (RSA, 1996, section 151) – thus, the dimensions of territorial, institutional and authorised functions are all articulated. Considering the uses of the concept as discussed above, the concept was defined in the current study as a representative and administrative government institution, authorised to perform a limited range of legislative and executive state functions in a circumscribed territory within a larger and sovereign jurisdiction.

How does the concept ‘local government’ differ from the concept ‘municipality’? The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (2007) provides two definitions of ‘municipality’, namely “[a] town, city, or district having local self-government” and “[t]he governing body of a town, city, or district having local self-government”. These two definitions differ from and overlap each other as the first one refers to a territory (town, city or district), while the second one refers to a public institution (governing body of a town city, or district). Both definitions refer to “local” (thus, lowest sphere of government) and “self-government”, most probably implying performing certain state functions. Villat’s (2004, p. 1271) definition of ‘municipality’ refers to similar attributes, namely “city [...] county, town, public authority, [or] public corporation” and “a corporate body, capable of performing the same proprietary functions as any private corporation and liable for its torts in the same manner and to the same extent as private corporations” (Villat, 2004, p. 1261). Brunet-Jailly and Martin (2010, p. 15) provide a more comprehensive definition of a ‘municipality’, namely “a multifunctional or multipurpose local government [...] elected bodies that have a wide number of functions”. While the phrases ‘local government’ and ‘municipality’ apparently have the same meaning within the context of the state, I use the phrase ‘local government’ mostly in this article.

4.2. Key attributes of local government

According to Walker and Avant (2014, p. 168), identifying the defining attributes of a concept is “the heart of concept analysis” as it shows “the cluster of attributes most frequently associated with the concept”. Informed by the various overlapping uses of the concept ‘local government’, three broad categories of attributes of ‘local government’ were identified, namely institutional, behavioural and territorial (see Figure 1). These attributes do not present themselves in a consistent way in the scholarly literature but are nevertheless distinctly articulated in their founding documents.

4.2.1. Institutional: Representative council and professional administration

The first key attribute of the concept ‘local government’ is the institutional nature of this social phenomenon to which it refers (Lawson, 2016, p. 362). This institutional attribute is not empirically visible as it is a construction of the human mind. In essence, institutions consist of individuals in a specific relationship to each other. Institutions are a way in which individual human beings are organised to ensure the realisation of their shared legitimate purposes. Institutions are characterised by authentic and inauthentic individuals being-in-the-world or being-with-others, who either care (authentic) or do not care (inauthentic) for others (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 225–229). Stiegler (2013, p. 133) refers to these two categories of individuals as affected and disaffected individuals. Institutions are therefore generally linked to the realisation of legitimate purposes through associations, communities and organisation structures (Scruton & Finnis, 1989, p. 274). One may assume that the realisation of legitimate purpose would not have been possible without affected, caring individuals. This type of construction within the sphere of the state is usually formalised by founding decisions documented in e.g. a constitution and other legislation. It therefore makes sense that a contextual exploration of the institutional or structural attribute of ‘local government’ departs from such founding documents.

Considering my situatedness within the SA context, my exploration of the organisation or structure of ‘local government’ departs from founding documents, such as the SA Constitution, legislation and policy documents (see Table 1), which outline the institutional or structural dimension of local government in South Africa. The institutional attribute of local government seems to unfold in two components, namely a representative and an administrative structure. These two institutional components consist of individual human beings, related to each other according to the specific roles and tasks assigned to them in the world of local government. As ‘Daseins’, these individuals are simultaneously being-in-the-world of local government institutions, but also being-with-others (residents, councillors or officials) in an either authentic or inauthentic manner (see Heidegger, 1962, pp. 185, 220). Furthermore, the literature confirms that Heidegger’s notion of *Dasein* is not restricted to individual beings but includes collective beings (Göpffarth, 2020, p. 258; Schmid, 2004, p. 133; Stroh, 2015, p. 246). Applied to the world of local government

within which individual *Daseins* are situated, the notion *Dasein* also comprises collectives such as local government councils, administrations and communities.

The two-fold institutional attribute of local government is confirmed by the scholarly literature reporting on studies of these institutions. Empirical referents of this attribute are provided in Table 1. A logical implication of the institutional or structural attribute of the social construct 'local government' is its behavioural attribute disclosed by its performance of a limited range of associated functions, which are discussed next.

4.2.2. *Behavioural: Performance of a limited range of state functions*

The second key attribute of the concept 'local government' is of a behavioural nature, namely its performance of a limited range of state functions. These functions are assigned to be performed by individuals within a specific relationship to other individuals while being-with-others (see Heidegger, 1962, p. 220). The performance of these limited range of state functions is in terms of Heidegger's philosophy of *Dasein*, an act of care for the world and "the others" in this world (Heidegger, 1962, p. 227). This attribute also serves to distinguish the local government sphere from other spheres of governments, such as national or provincial governments. These functions include the making of laws (usually called 'by-laws'), and the enforcing and administering of these laws and functions, which are statutory assigned to them (Ontario, 2001; RSA, 1996). The review of statutory documents and scholarly literature confirms that local government is characterised by a specific limited range of state functions. The empirical referents of these functions are listed in Table 1.

It is nevertheless evident that the functions performed by local governments in diverse contexts may be similar but not necessarily the same. This is confirmed by an observation by Burnet-Jailly and Martin (2010, pp. 181–182) that municipalities "in Australia have never offered the same range of functions as municipalities in other Anglo-based nations". Although different permutations of functions are to be performed by local governments within different contexts, the "family resemblance" (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 32) of its functional permutation makes it possible to recognise a local government as such. The permutations of local government functions within a specific context are constantly influenced by other attributes, such as its institutional structure and sphere of territorial jurisdiction (see Alam, 2015, p. 34; Caldas et al., 2019, p. 513; Elston & Dixon, 2020, p. 113; Sancton, 2000a, p. 7; Wolman, 2008, p. 99).

4.2.3. *Territorial: Jurisdiction within larger jurisdiction spheres*

The third key attribute of the concept 'local government' is its sphere of territorial jurisdiction within larger jurisdiction spheres of the state or province. This attribute has specific implications for councillors and officials as *Daseins*, as it provides a territorial demarcation for them to be caring and concerned while being-in-the-world and being-with-others (see Heidegger, 1962). Furthermore, this attribute links the concept 'local

government' directly to the concept 'state', as the jurisdiction of a local government is confined to "a particular territory" within a state (Scruton, 2007, p. 663). Limited spheres of territorial jurisdiction relate to the concept 'subsidiarity', which means "the absolute right of local communities to take decisions for themselves, including the decision to surrender the matter to a larger forum" (Scruton, 2007, p. 671). In the context of the state and local government, this concept implies that there is no valid reason for a higher sphere of government to perform functions that could be performed satisfactorily on a lower sphere of government (Drew & Grant, 2017, p. 522; Loxton, 1993, p. 80; Robson, 2006, p. 54). Drawing from the work of Heidegger, Richardson (2003, p. 586) refers to "the dwelling", which one can interpret in the context of this study as the territory within which the residents can be themselves and feel at home. With this in mind, the territorial attribute has direct implications for both the institutional and behavioural attributes of local government.

As indicated earlier in terms of use of the concept 'local government', the attribute 'territory' has different references and names, such as town, city, region or district, and is constantly evolving. A study on municipalities in the Ontario province of Canada (see Sancton, 2000b, p. 7) confirmed territorial size not only as a distinct characteristic of local government, but also as a factor influencing the other attributes, such as institution and functions, as well as the level of involvement of residents "in the issues affecting them" (Nurse, 2015, p. 69). The geographical boundaries of the territorial jurisdiction spheres of a local government are thus not fixed but change continuously.

4.3. Key antecedents of local government

The concept 'antecedent' refers to "those events or incidents that must occur or be in place prior to the occurrence of a concept" (Walker & Avant, 2014, p. 173). An antecedent is thus similar to a necessary condition for the existence of a concept and the reality to which it refers. It is therefore assumed that, without the presence of certain antecedents, local governments will not be able to exist.

What are the antecedents for 'local government'? To identify and describe the antecedents for the concept 'local government', it makes sense to start with the founding documents and then expand the process to the scholarly literature.

4.3.1. Constitutional and statutory provisions

As indicated earlier in this article, a constitution as antecedent of local government is not applicable to local government in all countries. However, a constitution may articulate the purpose of a local government within the jurisdiction sphere of a specific country. Within the SA context, the 1996 Constitution provides, amongst others, for the status, objects, developmental duties, powers and functions, and the establishment of municipalities, while government policy and subordinate enabling legislation provide for the detailed implementation of these provisions. In addition to the constitutional

and legislative provisions, the policies of the national and provincial governments – as well as a multiplicity of enabling legislation – make the existence of local government possible.

At conceptual level, one can argue that a wide variety of constitutional, statutory and policy measures serve as preconditions for the existence of the concept ‘local government’ and the reality to which it refers.

4.3.2. *Residents*

‘Residents’ – as antecedent of ‘local government’ – is not static but change continuously. Within the SA context, the concept ‘residents’ refers to “visitors and other people residing outside the municipality who, because of their presence in the municipality, make use of services or facilities provided by the municipality” as well as “the poor and other disadvantaged sections of such body of persons” (RSA, 2000, section 1). Residents are individuals constituting societies and, in some cases, communities who live within the territory of a local government. Individual residents form the core of a local government. De Beer, a South African philosopher, articulates the importance of individuals within society as follows (De Beer, 2015, p. 633):

Individuals are in possession of immense capacity potential [...]. The capacity to think, to affect, to love, to live, to share is required for the invention of communities. The more thoroughly individuated singular individuals there are the more possible it would become to invent community on a grand scale which may have a definite therapeutic effect and impact on society as well. The engagement of individuals in their full singularity in as many critical areas of society as possible, namely economics, education, health care, culture, knowledge, politics, ethics are urgently required for healthy communities to emerge with immense therapeutic implications not only for themselves, but for the whole of society

A local government is thus situated within these societies or even communities of residents, however unstructured they may be. Residents have evolving characteristics, needs, expectations, anxieties and freedoms. Residents are thus not only recipients of public services, but also individual human beings with the possibility of care (Heidegger, 1962, p. 424). In addition to the residents, local government is preceded by its distinct natural and physical setting, which is discussed next.

4.3.3. *Natural and physical setting*

The unique nature of the natural and physical setting of a local government as an antecedent is a key consideration in the demarcation of the territorial jurisdiction sphere of a local government. As this antecedent is fixed to a specific geographical territory, its

effect on a local government will vary amongst local governments. The natural and physical settings of a local government comprises elements such as water, the sun, soil, minerals, as well as topographical features, such as mountains, rivers, deserts and natural forests. These elements comprising the natural and physical settings of a local government are usually taken into account during the demarcation of its territory (RSA, 1998a, section 25).

A study of development in sub-Saharan Africa shows that this antecedent has specific implications for the policies and functions of a local government regarding agricultural cultivation, irrigation, transportation and energy (Ukwandu, 2015, p. 18). Examples of other policy and functional implications are the need for a low-carbon economy (DPME, 2020, p. 146), sustainable land use and agrarian transformation (Waterberg District Municipality, 2021, p. 39), the protection of natural habitat such as wetlands, floodplains and water resources (Waterberg District Municipality, 2021, p. 127). The natural and physical settings of a local government also have specific implications for its economic development and growth, natural infrastructure (ecosystems), climate and geospatial issues, geographical inequalities, low-carbon slow tourism and water (Chattaraj et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2023; Merlo et al., 2019; Touchant, 2022; Yu et al., 2021).

4.3.4. *The world of diverse governments*

The definition by the *Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Political Thought* of the concept 'local government' explicitly refers to the presence of other layers of government, namely "a larger and sovereign jurisdiction" (Scruton, 2007, p. 402). The implication of this definition is that a local government is determined by its situatedness within these larger jurisdiction spheres, such as the jurisdictions of a provincial and a national government. Drawing from Heidegger's philosophy of *Dasein*, the idea of being-in-the world of a diversity of sometimes overlapping government jurisdiction spheres implies for local government an anxiety about its "potentiality-for-Being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 235) and being itself as local government. Within the SA context, the Constitution (RSA, 1996, section 154) articulates this 'being-in-the-world' as "municipalities in co-operative government". This world of governments is also present in other countries, such as Spain "via the use of European Union Structural funds" (Castán Broto & Dewberry, 2016, p. 3026), Canada with regional co-operation (Sancton, 2000b, p. 11), the United States as intergovernmental responses to emergencies (McDonald et al., 2020, p. 187), and Peru as 'cogovernance' (De La Riva Agüero, 2022).

In addition to its cooperation with other layers of government, the territorial characteristic implies shared boundaries with other local governments. These shared boundaries as well as shared sphere of government entail the need for co-operation with other local governments on matters of mutual interest and contractual co-operative relationships with private service providers (Bromberg & Henderson, 2015; Henderson & Bromberg, 2016).

4.3.5. *Capability*

While most of the sources consulted refer to ‘capacity’, I have decided to use the term ‘capability’ for this antecedent. The dictionary definitions of ‘capability’ include “the power or ability to do something” (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2016), “the quality of being capable” (Merriam-Webster, 2023), and “the ability or qualities that are necessary to do [something]” (Collins, 2023). The dictionary definitions of ‘capacity’ reveal similar meanings, such as “the ability or power to do or understand something” (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2016), “legal competency or fitness”, “an individual’s mental or physical ability” (Merriam-Webster, 2023) and “ability to do [something]” (Collins, 2023).

The antecedent ‘capability’ closely relates to what Heidegger refers to as the *Dasein*’s “Being-free for one’s potentiality-for-Being” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 236). This freedom implies for a local government the ability to be a ‘local government’ by performing its functions. This antecedent seems to include a diversity of abilities or qualities required by a local government to achieve its objectives (Oates, 1999, p. 1122). For Acharya and Scott (2022, p. 64), these abilities and qualities consist of, amongst others, “strong technical, administrative and fiscal capabilities”. Considering the dictionary definitions, the legal definition as well as some scholarly definitions of the related concepts ‘capacity’ and ‘capability’, the antecedent ‘capability’ refers to a local government having sufficient funding, capable council members and officials, and ethical leadership for performing its functions. Convinced by the rich and inclusive scholarly tradition on social justice (see Nussbaum 1997; Nussbaum, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000; Nussbaum, 2002; Nussbaum, 2006; Nussbaum, 2010; Uyan-Semerci, 2007; Villani, 2012), I have decided to use the concept ‘capability’ for referring to the comprehensive material and human abilities necessary for local government to exist and perform. The first of these capabilities is that of sufficient funding, which is discussed next.

Sufficient funding: While a local government needs sufficient funding to perform its functions, it is also expected that the fiscal and financial affairs of a municipality would be managed in a sound and sustainable manner. A comprehensive collection of scholarly literature on, amongst others, local government finance, budgeting and cost confirms the validity of capability related to securing and managing sufficient funding as antecedent for a local government to perform its functions efficiently (Alam, 2015; Arcelus et al., 2015; Cabannes, 2015; Hanabe et al., 2017; Miller & Hokenstad, 2014).

Capable councillors and officials: With this antecedent, I assume that a local government with adequate funding can hardly exist as entity without capable councillors and officials. Drawing on Heidegger’s work *Being and Time* (1962), care is the consequence of individual local government councillors’ and officials’ anxiety (Heidegger, 1962, p. 233 also refers to “uncanniness”) and subsequent efforts to understand, attune and being-with-others by being-they-self. This implies that these individuals being-within-local-government are capable of taking care of their own potentiality-for-Being, of taking care of things (*Fürsorge*), and of being concerned (*besorgen*) about others (Heidegger, 1962, p. 237). Considering that municipal councillors and officials sometimes have to perform highly technical functions in dealing with complex and wicked challenges, they need to be

capable to perform these functions. Capability as an antecedent is rooted in the work of Nussbaum (1999, p. 327) who distinguishes between three categories of capabilities, namely basic, internal and combined capabilities. Among others, these capabilities include the intrinsic equipment of individuals and person-specific conditions for performing the requisite functions. Public administration-specific capabilities may include:

- reflexivity (the ability to question and reframe own position on an issue)
- resilience (an adaptive capability to deal with unpredictable challenges)
- responsiveness (continuous awareness of societal expectations)
- reciprocity (interconnectedness with stakeholders)
- revitalising (response to stagnations, power plays or deadlocks)
- rescaling (addressing mismatches between the scale of a problem and the scale of the intervening response) (Termeer et al., 2016, pp. 13–15; Wessels, 2022, pp. 4–7)

One can thus expect that capable councillors and officials are authentic *Daseins* capable of caring. Closely related to the capability of councillors and officials to perform their functions is the capability of ethical leadership, which is discussed next.

Ethical leadership: In a recent study on effective local government council leadership in Michigan (USA), Dzordzormenyoh (2022, p. 229) articulates leadership as “the act of either influencing or transforming members of a group or organization to achieve a specific goal or objective”. While leadership may also be a necessary condition for a crime syndicate, in this context, this capability refers to a specific type of leadership, namely ethical leadership. This capability is a necessary condition, not only for an organisational ethical climate, ethical conduct, ethical governance, compliance and accountability, but also for local government to perform its functions towards accomplishing its goals (AGSA, 2021, p. 65; Dzordzormenyoh, 2022, p. 230; Erakovich & Kolthoff, 2016, pp. 872–873).

4.4. Expected key consequences of ‘local government’

Walker and Avant (2014, p. 173) describe the consequences of a concept as “those events or incidents that occur as a result of the occurrence of the concept – in other words, the outcomes of the concept”. This section sets out to identify those consequences or outcomes of ‘local government’. The ultimate consequence of local government is society’s experience of being-cared-for and feeling at home. For De Beer (2015, p. 633), it may be “something like community [...] in the sense of people being together, living together and sharing matters intimately”. In his work *Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals*, the French philosopher, Bernard Stiegler (2013, p. 132), articulates a dream that may also be applicable to consequence of local government, namely “the care taken of objects and subjects of individual and collective desire”. While the SA Constitution apparently does not envisage or describe the consequence of this concept, its preamble refers, inter alia, to the improvement of “the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person” (RSA, 1996, Preamble). Improved quality of life of the residents of a municipality seems to be a valid consequence of ‘local government’.

Furthermore, section 152 refers to the “objects of local government” with reference to democratic and accountable government, sustainable service provision, social and economic development, a safe and healthy environment, and community involvement in matters of local government (RSA, 1996, section 152). Comparing the dictionary definitions of the words ‘consequence’ and ‘object’ with each other, it seems that both words refer to the result or end of a specific effort or action. A vexing question is as follows: Can the envisaged ‘objects’ of ‘local government’ set by the SA Constitution, also serve as conceptual consequences for ‘local government’ in other contexts, such as Canada, Rwanda and the Russian Federation? The proposed consequences of ‘local government’ are briefly discussed below.

4.4.1. *Quality of life*

It is noteworthy that several scholarly studies on quality of life use items, such as services, employment, housing, education, roads, health care, old-age provision, crime prevention and recreation facilities, as indicators for measuring improved quality of life (Castán Broto & Dewberry, 2016; Møller, 2007, p. 399; Møller & Roberts, 2019; Møller & Saris, 2001, p. 109; Schlemmer & Møller, 1997, p. 45; Van Ryzin, 2015, pp. 426, 429, 438). Quality of life, whatever it means for distinct individuals or communities, is undoubtedly a key consequence of local government. Quality of life may mean being at home within an affected and caring society becoming community.

4.4.2. *Democracy and accountability*

A second key consequence of local government is that of communities experiencing democracy and accountability. The SA Constitution refers to this as the object of “democratic and accountable government for local communities” [RSA, 1996, section 152(1) (a)]. This consequence resonates with how the Municipal Corporations Act 1835 of the United Kingdom describes local government, namely as being responsible to “the inhabitants of the district” (Scruton, 2007, p. 403). This responsibility articulates the envisaged local government consequence of a democratically elected council who is accountable to the electorate. This consequence is directly aligned to Goal 16 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015, p. 14) with reference to “effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”. Furthermore, within the context of the United States, Rivera and Uttaro (2021, p. 97) emphasise the goal of the New Public Service (NPS) Principles, namely the pursuance of democratic values through democratic interactions. This consequence implies that the outcome of local government is a democracy consisting of inclusive participatory processes (Hanabe et al., 2017, p. 406). The implication of *Dasein* as both an individual and collective being (Göpffarth, 2020, pp. 255–256; Stroh, 2015, p. 246) is *Dasein*’s concurrent presence in distinct and overlapping worlds, such as the state, local government, society, culture and family. Hence, the consequence of democracy and accountability is rooted

in the presence of affected, autonomous, singular and caring individual members of society, able to take care of themselves and others and being-accountable-in-the-world (see De Beer, 2015, p. 633). Democracy and accountability as consequences are thus in their essence consequences of authentic *Daseins'* being-in-the-world and being-with-others.

4.4.3. Sustainable municipal services

Considering that the limited range of state functions performed by local government include the distribution of energy (e.g. electricity) and the provision of water and sanitation services, the sustainability of these services as a third consequence of local government seems to be imperative. This consequence is closely aligned to Goals 6, 7, 11, 12 and 15 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015), and constitutes the core of local government consequences.

4.4.4. Social and economic development

The literature (see Basson et al., 2018; Brunet-Jailly & Martin, 2010, p. 3; Hanabe et al., 2017, p. 393; Hanley, 2013, p. 514; Koma, 2010; Lam & Conway, 2018, p. 643) seems to be fairly in agreement on social and economic development as a key consequence or “mission” (Abels, 2012, p. 395) of local government. The observation that “municipalities want to be able to steer local economic development” (Ploegmakers et al., 2013, p. 336) implies the performing of planning and regulatory functions resulting in local economic development. An example of municipalities pursuing the outcome of economic development includes the consideration of, in the United States, city council consolidations (Hall et al., 2018a, p. 256) and in Canada, the setting of “setting development charges, standards on public utilities, building codes, investment priorities and local economic development” (Turvey, 2017, p. 287). Bearing in mind the various other role players involved in social and economic development, a reasonable conclusion may be that the consequence of local government is at least a climate conducive to social and economic development.

4.4.5. Safe and healthy environment

This consequence is about the state of being a resident of or community in a local government or municipality: being safe and healthy. Møller (2005, p. 290) refers to “the possible importance of the personal safety factor as a mediator of life satisfaction”. Her study indicates that the notion of personal safety includes that of neighbourhood safety (Møller, 2005, p. 263) – thus a state of being without fear for crime (Møller, 2013, p. 920). Within the context of local government, this may imply residents experiencing properly designed “parks that are safe and are perceived to be safe” (Ellis & Schwartz,

2016, p. 4) for children to play. This consequence also includes environmental health elements, such as quality of air, lighting (streets and houses), noise pollution, as well as access to clean water and sanitation services (Murray & Pauw, 2022, p. 103). Residents' experience of a state of being within a safe and healthy environment seems to be a key consequence to expect from local government.

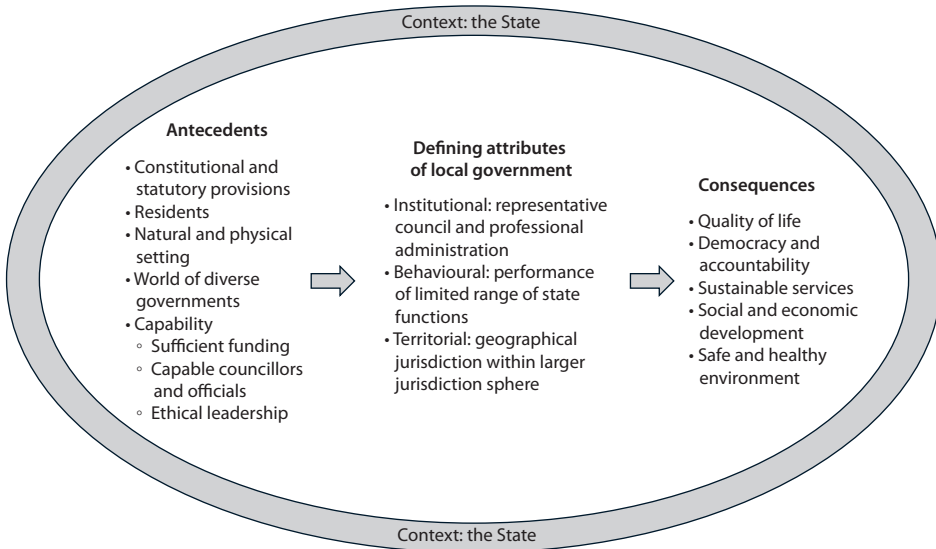


Figure 1.
A concept analysis of 'local government'

4.5. Empirical referents of the concept

Considering that the concept 'local government' is a social construction, it is thus not so easy to recognise the concept by observing the phenomenon to which it refers. Walker and Avant (2014, p. 174) propose the use of empirical referents as the "classes or categories of actual phenomena that by their existence or presence demonstrate the occurrence of the concept itself". As concepts are recognised by their defining attributes, empirical referents provide evidence of the existence of these attributes of a concept.

This section lists some empirical referents for the attributes 'political and administrative structures', 'limited range of state functions' and 'territorial jurisdiction' of a local government. These referents – presented in Table 2 – are derived from the literature review conducted for this study, as well as from a review of constitutional and statutory documents. While these referents may be a confirmation of the occurrence of this concept, the presentation in Table 2 is not sufficiently structured for identifying the underlying assumptions about the nature of the phenomenon to which the concept refers.

Attributes and empirical referents	Citation
Institutional: representative council and professional administration	
<i>Representative council</i>	
Legislative and executive authority (representative council)	Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 1996); Local Government: Municipal Structures Act 117 (RSA, 1998c); Local Government: Municipal Systems Act 32 (RSA, 2000)
Municipal council; council size; majority coalitions	Barnett, 2011; Barnett, 2020; Barnett et al., 2020; Hanley, 2013; Lewis, 2019; Lewis & Hendrawan, 2019; Meloche & Kilfoil, 2017
Relations between councils and chief administrative officer (CAO)	Sancton, 2000b; Siegel, 2015; Meloche & Kilfoil, 2017
Role of politics; politically motivated changes; political interest	Gore, 2021; King, 2014; Neumann et al., 2014; Resnick, 2014; Warner et al., 2021
<i>Professional administration</i>	
Bureaucracy	Sørensen & Bentzen, 2020, p. 139
Organisation and management	Das Gupta et al., 2020
Careers in local government	Rose, 2015
Common service centres	Sharma et al., 2021
Contact centres	Nam & Pardo, 2014
Hybrid organisations	Tun et al., 2021
Municipal departments	Cabannes, 2015; Levin & Sefati, 2018
Municipal employees; municipal employees' service motivation; employment cuts	French & Emerson, 2014; Haider et al., 2019; Leisink & Bach, 2014
Relationships between councils and CAOs	Sancton, 2000b; Siegel, 2015
Restructuring; reduced cost of administration; institutional system	Abels, 2012; Cobban, 2019; Hurl, 2018
Behavioural: performance of limited range of state functions	
Making of laws (by-laws)	Ontario, 2001; RSA, 1996
Range of functions	Brunet-Jailly & Martin, 2010, pp. 181–182
Administration; purchasing	Elston & Dixon, 2020; Glock & Broens, 2013
Broadband services	Mersereau, 2021
Communication; municipal television news	Avelé, 2013; Lindgren, 2016
E-services	Andersson et al., 2022; Chen & Kim, 2019; Gao & Lee, 2017; Hung et al., 2020; Li & Feeney, 2014; Prendiville, 2018; Wirtz & Kurtz, 2016

Ecosystem services; forest services	Brink et al., 2018; Lam & Conway, 2018; Meléndez-Ackerman et al., 2022
Educational services; schools	Archibong et al., 2015; Farooqi & Forbes, 2020; Kachne, 2013
Emergency services	Henderson & Bromberg, 2016; Karabanow et al., 2023
Energy efficiency services	Polzin et al., 2016
Health care services	Agbodzakey & Taylor, 2019; Bromberg & Henderson, 2015; Das Gupta et al., 2020; Peckham et al., 2017
Infrastructure services	Shlomo, 2017; Wiesel et al., 2018
Law enforcement	Barnett-Ryan, 2022; Sahdan et al., 2020
Library services	Jones, 2020; McCahill et al., 2020
Municipal service transformation; service quality	Hughes & Peterson, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2017
National service scheme	Arthur et al., 2016
Non-emergency services	Xu et al., 2017
Public transport and mobility services	Schaefer et al., 2022
Serviced building land provision	Ploegmakers et al., 2013
Services and guidelines for food, water and energy in African cities	Sesan et al., 2022; Tempelhoff, 2011; Zaganjor et al., 2019
Social services	Celebi, 2022; Da Veiga & Bronzo, 2014; Miller & Hokenstad, 2014; Thunberg et al., 2016; Torpey-Saboe, 2015; Wollmann, 2018
Sport services	King, 2014
Taxation; property tax	Hall et al., 2018b; Lewis, 2019
Urban planning and development	Consciência Silvestre et al., 2019; Meléndez-Ackerman et al., 2022
Waste services; food waste recycling	Caldas et al., 2019; De la Riva Agüero, 2021; Fogarty et al., 2021; Morgan-Sagastume et al., 2016
Water and sanitation	Cook et al., 2020; Hajiseyedjavadi et al., 2022; Holstead et al., 2023; Pahl-Wostl et al., 2023; Pierce et al., 2022
Territorial: geographical jurisdiction within larger jurisdiction sphere	
Demarcated land area	Bispham et al., 2006, p. 146–157; DPLG, 2008; RSA, 1998c, sections 2–6; Roy, 2006
Municipal jurisdictions	Cobban, 2019; Lewis, 2017; Koma, 2010; Meloche & Kilfoil, 2017; Alam, 2015; Elston & Dixon, 2020; Caldas et al., 2019, p. 531; Sancton, 2000a, p. 7; Wolman, 2008, p. 99

5. A social ontology of local government

Our search for a social ontology of local government departs from a definition of the concept ‘local government’ as being simultaneously a representative and administrative government institution, authorised to perform a limited range of legislative and executive state functions in a circumscribed territory within a larger, sovereign jurisdiction. Three key attributes of the concept were identified, namely institutional, behavioural and territorial attributes (see Table 1). In an attempt to understand local government, two ontological questions about the social reality to which this concept refers, have emerged:

- What is the nature of ‘local government’?
- What are the underlying assumptions about this reality?

5.1. The nature of local government

While the concept analysis identified three attributes which could assist us to recognise the reality to which the concept ‘local government’ refers, a social ontology of local government entails observing, describing and understanding local government with indeterminate human characteristics, orientations and behaviour, as a “unitary phenomenon” (see Heidegger, 1962, p. 53) situated within an interconnected human, spiritual and natural world (see Heidegger, 1962, p. 54). The concept ‘world’ is used by Heidegger (1962, p. 65) for “the totality of those entities which can be present-at-hand in the world”. This implies that local government as a human construct and social collective can be recognised, described and understood as a result of the unity of its institutional, behavioural and territorial attributes, as situated within the multi-layered and interconnected world.

Ontological, local government – as a collective *Dasein* with an immanent tension between anxiety and care (see Heidegger, 1962) – may simultaneously be viewed as being a social collective of individuals, an institution consisting of individuals, and a social action or intervention performed by individuals. Local government is thus not a machine, but in essence both a social construction of individual *Daseins* and a collective *Dasein* within a specific time and space. Such an approach to this social reality is however informed by underlying assumptions about this reality in its world, which is discussed next.

5.2. Underlying assumptions about local government

The second ontological question pertains to the underlying assumptions about the antecedents (conditions), consequences (purposes), institutional (political and administrative), behavioural (functions) and territorial attributes of local government. Should local government be viewed as a social organisation, Morrison and Mota’s (2023a, p. 203) theory of the corporate mind comes to the fore. Their theory holds that “the purpose of any organization is to sustain a corporate mind” (Morrison & Mota, 2023a,

p. 203), which they describe as “a set of beliefs, desires, and intentions that is attached to an organizational form”. For the individual *Daseins*, this means the “attunement of a state-of-mind” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 176). Subsequently, corporate minds “enable people with any set of values to achieve things together that they would find it very hard to accomplish individually” (Morrison & Mota, 2023a, p. 204). A corporate mind thus “drives actions” (Morrison & Mota, 2023b, p. 366), as it contains “intentional states that cause the organization to act so as to change the world in line with some imagined state of affairs” (Morrison & Mota, 2023a, p. 206). In the case of local government, this imagined state of affairs (see also Heidegger’s reference to “potentiality-for-being” [1962, 233]) serves as the purpose of such a social collective and is usually recorded in founding documents, such as a constitution or legislation. For this reason, Martela’s (2023, p. 363) notion of a social ontology of purpose may be used either simultaneously or as an alternative for an ontology of the corporate mind.

The consequence of the concept ‘local government’, as identified earlier, is thus similar to the purpose of local government towards which its functions and actions are coordinated and directed (Martela, 2023, p. 365). This purpose encapsulates the reason for the existence of an institution which, for local government, might most probably be found in the maximising of care and concern for society resulting in accountability, quality of life, democracy, sustained municipal services, social and economic development, and a safe and healthy environment for its residents. Ontologies of the corporate mind and purpose should however constantly question the sufficiency of these reasons for existence of local governments within an evolving, complex and multi-layered world.

It seems, however, that a social ontology of care – as informed by Heidegger’s *Dasein* – provides the most appropriate theoretical lens for understanding local government. This ontology needs to question the assumptions underlying the institutional, functional, and territorial attributes of local government with a specific focus on the individual within this reality.

5.2.1. Assumption 1

The representative institutions of local government consist of individuals elected to represent the values and interests of residents and to provide direction to the administrative institutions for performing their allocated functions accordingly. Considering Heidegger’s reference to the “potentiality-for-being” (1962, p. 233) of *Dasein*, a vexing question is the following: To what extent are both the representative institutions and their constituent individual councillors’ state-of-mind attuned to the relevant local community of residents’ envisioned “potentiality-for-being” (see Heidegger, 1962, p. 233)?

5.2.2. Assumption 2

The administrative institutions of local government consist of officials capable of performing their allocated functions under the direction of the political structure. A vexing question is the following: To what extent are both the administrative institutions and their constituent individual local government officials capable of performing their functions with care?

5.2.3. Assumption 3

The functions of local government as allocated by constitutional and legislative provisions and performed by the representative and administrative institutions within a dedicated territory, fulfil the needs of its residents. A vexing question is the following: What is necessary for local government functions to bring about “care taken of objects and subjects of individual and collective desire” (Stiegler, 2013, p. 132) within society?

5.2.4. Assumption 4

The territorial attribute of local government provides a geographical demarcation for local government *Daseins* to be caring and concerned while being-in-the-world and being-with-others. A vexing question is the following: What is necessary for residents within a demarcated territory to feel cared for and at home within a society or community?

To conclude section 5: While local government as human construct can be recognised through the concurrent presence of its institutional, behavioural and territorial attributes, it has shown to be essentially a human and humane construct with a caring individual and collective *Dasein* to its core. The underlying assumptions postulate distinct inter-relationships of care amongst various categories of individual and collective *Daseins*, such as resident, community, councillor, representative institution, administrative institution and local government official. Furthermore, these assumptions postulate a caring quality for the behaviour and functions of the collective *Dasein* within and across their territorial jurisdiction sphere. Lastly, this social ontology of care envisaged local government society and communities being affected, caring and at home in their dwelling (see Richardson, 2003, p. 586).

6. Conclusion

In response to the ontological question “What is ‘local government’, and how can it be understood?” my aim with this conceptual study was to describe a social ontology of local government. I therefore firstly reported on an analysis of the concept ‘local

government' by defining the concept as a representative and administrative government institution, authorised to perform a limited range of legislative and executive state functions in a circumscribed territory within a larger and sovereign jurisdiction. I proceeded to identify and describe its key attributes, antecedents and consequences (as summarised in Table 1). The empirical referents that informed my analysis of the concept were provided in Table 2. Informed by the concept analysis, I continued to provide an ontological description of the nature of local government and the underlying assumptions about this reality. This social ontology holds that local government is in its core a *Dasein* and a collection of *Daseins* with immanent tensions between anxiety and care.

What does this social ontology of care mean for the study of local government? Firstly, the proposed social ontology of local government care is submitted as an agenda item for consideration, deliberation and improvement. It provides a point of departure for describing and comparing instances of this reality as situated in different contexts. Secondly, this social ontology serves as a proposed menu for questioning and challenging the underlying assumptions about a caring local government, specifically within different contexts. Whereas the current contribution has drawn its empirical insights mainly from South African statutory sources, and its conceptual insights from the systematised literature review, follow-up studies are imperative for validating the proposed social ontology of care within different local government contexts. As part of my continuous search for meaningful knowledge, I will proceed to validate empirically this ontology in local government realities within different contexts by providing rich, ontic descriptions of the selected diverse local government realities.

While the day-to-day well-being of people worldwide is indeed affected in dissimilar ways and intensity by local governments, Public Administration scholars continually ask questions about, amongst others, aspects of good or bad local government and remedies for the latter. With this study, I contribute a social ontology of care to the ongoing discourse and attempts to describe and understand the social realities of public administration – and specifically of local government – and for identifying and questioning the underlying assumptions about them.

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