

NOT FOR SALE

BEITT

BUILT ENVIRONMENT INTEGRATION TASK TEAM

Issue .01 | AUGUST 2020

**"having a good idea or plan is easy,
but that idea or plan is no good if
you can't influence decision
making."**

WHO IS THE BEITT?

Getting to know the city officials advancing
spatial transformation in South African cities



**"You're in the actual
coalface of what's happening. So when
people are fed up with service delivery,
they will come straight at you and they
expect you to have solutions and
answers"**

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BUILT ENVIRONMENT INTEGRATION TASK TEAM

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"What we're trying to get to is this place where you've been able to change the way that built environment practice happens at a municipal level to deliver better outcomes for communities."

GEOFFREY BICKFORD,
PROGRAMME MANAGER,
SOUTH AFRICAN CITIES NETWORK



THE JOURNEY OF THE TASK TEAM

In September 2017, the Built Environment Integration Task Team (BEITT) was re-established, and the South African Cities Network (SACN) launched the built environment integration partnership with Agence Française de Développement (AFD) and the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA). In establishing the BEITT, we knew we wanted to do three things: place city built environment practitioners at the centre of the programme's agenda; develop a deeper intelligence on the realities of municipal built environment practice (how do things actually work?); and, ambitiously, start to shift built environment practices.

The BEITT is a community of built environment practitioners who are working together to build a strong network of municipal practice. Four times a year, the BEITT group comes together physically to meet at a venue that embeds us in the built environment realities of our cities.

Throughout the year, the group is identifying and working on research projects, which provide insights and intelligence on some of the critical areas that are impeding cities from developing built environment practices that drive spatial transformation. One of the ideas to emerge from our work is that we all have important stories to tell and we should be telling our stories.

Over the years, we at the SACN have worked with incredibly talented, committed and passionate practitioners. Yet out in society exists a stereotypical view of municipal practitioners that does not reflect our experience. In this magazine, we profile the human beings that are the city practitioners who work in the BEITT. It has been a privilege to be on this BEITT journey and to get to know the incredible people who are working in municipalities to achieve spatial transformation.



PLANTING SEEDS

REHANA MOOSAJEE, RESEARCH ASSOCIATE
SOUTH AFRICAN CITIES NETWORK



I am always struck, in conversations with fellow South Africans, by the sentiment that everyone working in the public sector is corrupt, useless and non-caring. Yet I know from first-hand experience, having been an elected representative myself and again through my work with the SACN and the BEITT, that the public sector employs many men and women who are truly committed to dealing with the legacy of our past and to building a future where all human beings can realise their potential. I am deeply humbled and honoured by the opportunity that the SACN (via Geoff Bickford) and BEITT have afforded me to work with practitioners, from across South African cities, to better understand the systemic issues that need changing.

It has been rewarding and fulfilling to listen to and work with these remarkable individuals who, against all odds, are trying to effect change. Together we have visited places, met people and engaged in conversations that have profoundly impacted each of us. May we collectively use these experiences to transform the lives of others and the spaces we inherited.

PRACTITIONER PROFILES

BEITT

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



"When we take too long to issue title deeds to people in their RDP homes, I always reflect back on what that meant for my parents when I was trying to get into varsity."

NOSIPHO HLATSHWAYO

Group Head, City Strategy and Organisational Performance, City of Tshwane

Nosipho grew up in Inanda, a township just outside Durban in KwaZulu-Natal, "during a very volatile time where there were faction fights between the ANC and IFP [...] and clashes between the black and Indian communities". One of her first memories, at the age of five years, is seeing someone being necklaced*. She also couldn't understand why their Indian neighbours had to move nor why her parents couldn't get a bank loan to pay for her studies. This questioning

continued when Nosipho attended a multi-racial school – "in school I was a different person but when I was interacting with my parents in similar settings, there were things that we were restricted from doing". This questioning continued when Nosipho attended a multi-racial school – "in school I was a different person but when I was interacting with my parents in similar settings, there were things that we were restricted from doing".

She felt that what was happening wasn't right and needed to change. In urban planning, Nosipho found "the space for those questions to be answered and for those things to be undone"

**This is when a rubber tyre filled with petrol is placed around a person's head and shoulders and set alight. It takes the person about 20 minutes to die.*



.She entered in the profession in 1990s and found herself working with urban planners and companies that had created and built the space, which “facilitated the segregation of people” and “perpetuated the Apartheid spatial form”.

Although many viewed the profession in a negative light because of South Africa’s history, for Nosipho, urban planning enables her to improve the quality of people’s lives. She draws on her personal experiences in her work. For instance, when “we take too long to issue title deeds to people in their RDP homes, I always reflect back on what that meant for my parents when I was trying to get into varsity”. Her experience also helps when dealing with communities, as she understands that “everyone is trying to make a living at the end of the day”, but people also need “to understand how infrastructure works” and that too much unplanned development can result in the infrastructure collapsing. Nosipho has learnt that having a good idea or plan is easy, but that idea or plan is no good if “you can’t influence decision making”.

Therefore, much of her work is about influencing people to do things differently, which is often a “relentless exercise of engaging with people and trying to get the messaging across, and being consistent in the messaging without being rigid at the same time”. One such case was getting the city and stakeholders to think differently about community-based planning, as something adaptable to specific communities rather than a single city-wide approach. It required “different engagements with different stakeholders using different techniques”, and is ongoing, as stakeholders change and lessons are learned. Being resilient is also important in her work, “as things change so fast”, even the person you are accountable to “can change in a matter of hours”. For her, being resilient means “being grounded in your principles, [...] in your belief for what you think is just, for the built environment and for the people that you are serving”.

Nosipho would like to see a better balance between practitioners and academics, as the urban planning and built environment research “sometimes does not get filtered down or get critiqued by practitioners”. Research and academic institutions should be “at the centre of generating knowledge to resolve or to try and address the challenges” facing cities, but the applicability of their ideas also need to be testing. Nosipho is motivated when she sees “things that we have planned years ago coming to fruition”, such as the BRT system going to Alexandra, which she was involved with when she worked at the City of Joburg. What makes her day is when communities then tell her “ya, we are happy about this, this and that”.

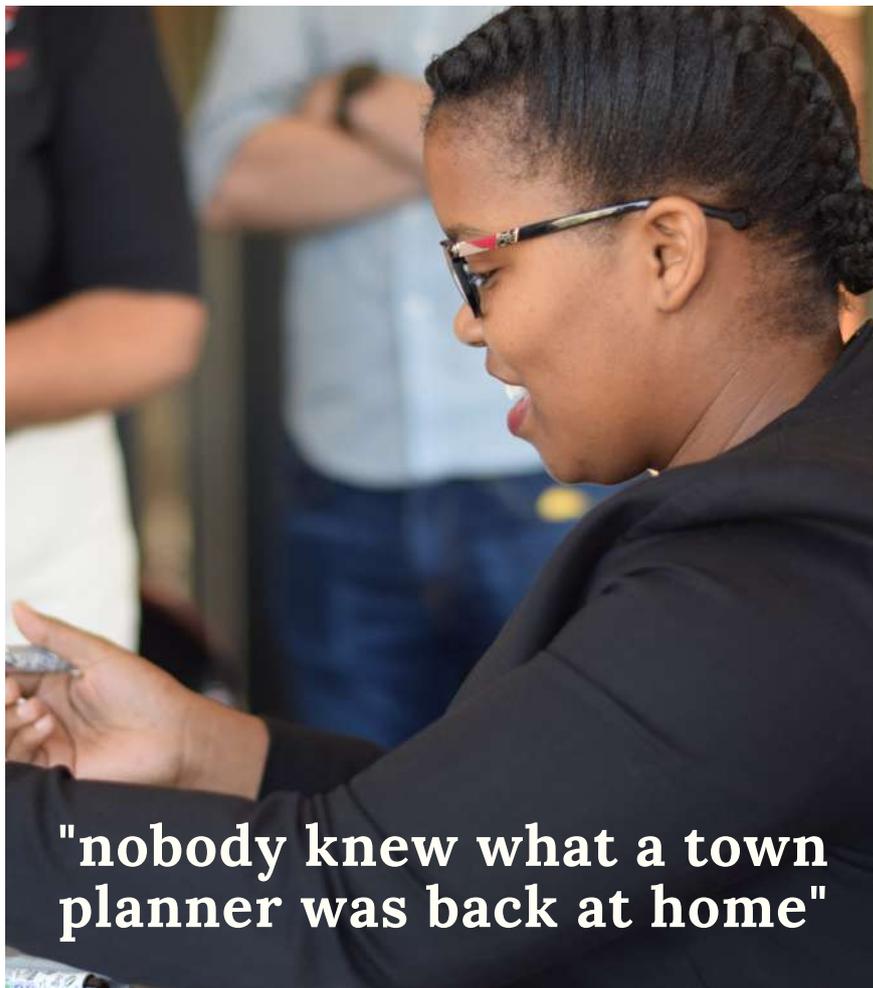


GCINEKILE LUTHULI

**Projects Executive, Human Settlements,
Engineering and Transport Cluster,
eThekweni Municipality**

“There’s nothing that I can’t do because when it’s in front of me and I have to deal with it, I deal with it” is Gcinekile’s approach to life. She credits her determination to growing up in KwaMaphumulo, a small rural town in north KwaZulu-Natal that still does not have running water. Life in the village was hard, and Gcinekile knew that she wanted more. As the youngest child, her family saw her as the “last hope” and worked to provide her with

opportunities that they had never had. After attending her local school in KwaMaphumulo, in Grade 6 she moved to a bi-racial school in Stanger (KwaDukuza). “It was quite a transition”, being a rural girl and having to compete with black and Indian children from urban areas “for the same marks and for the same attention”. Although it was difficult, Gcinekile feels that the experience shaped her – “until this day, I have always understood my difference, I have always understood that I am an individual and what I want to do”. It was good training “to stand for what I believe in regardless of the circumstances that surrounded me”.



"nobody knew what a town planner was back at home"

Gcinekile became a town planner by chance – “nobody knew what a town planner was back at home”. Her sister was studying accounting in Durban and, after meeting a town and regional planning student, suggested that Gcinekile explore this career option. As part of her research, Gcinekile visited the KwaDukuza local municipality where she met an intern doing his in-service training in the planning department and was happy to answer her many questions. This helped her make the decision to study town planning.

A meticulous planner, Gcinekile is the type of person who plans her work daily and weekly in advance, but the nature of her job means that unexpected meetings and other demands take away time from what she had planned. How she deals with this challenge is to allocate more time in her private time to get the work done because, as she explains, “you need to play your part in those meetings [...] it keeps you in the know” of what’s happening in the municipality.

For Gcinekile, creatively sharing responsibilities, getting the work done equally and presenting as a unit to the meetings offer a way of improving the functioning of the municipality. She has learnt that splitting and sharing responsibilities within her unit can help to address the time challenge. “It’s not a written thing, but we do tend to have an agreement whereby you can go to a meeting while this takes place, you can do this while I do that”. A crucial aspect is that everyone understands how their work fits into the whole city structure, although “people usually laugh at the office because I’m the one to look at the structure, the organogram, how work feeds into what my boss does”. Gcinekile’s strong organisational and people skills enable her to maximise her contribution and to assist interns: “I know that if you have those skills, it makes things better for you. You are able to work much better with people and you could also relate with them as well”.

For Gcinekile, being able to serve a city is an amazing opportunity, and what gets her up in the morning is knowing how much responsibility is placed on her shoulders and how much impact she can have as an individual. “If I have said I will do it, I want to make sure that I do it and I do it right” sums up how she lives her life.



ERIC RABOSHAKGA

Director for City Transformation and Spatial Planning, Department of Development Planning, City of Johannesburg

Growing up in a small village in Limpopo, Eric learned about the importance of hard work and the “spirit of community”. His experience of “digging holes, running after cattle, milking cattle and all associated tasks” taught him “that you need to do the work properly the first time, and put in the effort until the work is complete” – in other words, not to leave anything unfinished, as re-doing something is “much more painful than

doing something for the first time”. These two principles – hard work and community spirit – underpin Eric’s approach to work and life. Arriving in Johannesburg in 2005, what struck him the most was that people living in cities seem to prefer isolation: “Everybody prefers to be in their own cars, driving to work [...] one person in a car”. Yet people cannot exist in isolation, and when people help each other, “you can get so many things and so much done with these people working with you”. This belief makes Eric very good at relationship-building, which helps him to deal with the various frustrations of his job.

One frustration is the lack of coordination, particularly with neighbouring cities of Ekurhuleni and Tshwane, which results in

" Things have to change, and people have to be accommodated into the urban fabric regardless of their income or race or gender"

“transport systems that don’t talk to one another” and “infrastructure plans that don’t talk to one another”. Eric hopes to improve the coordination of efforts and resources across municipalities because “if the efforts are placed into one basket, it becomes easier for everyone to reach their targets”. An important, sometimes challenging, aspect of his job is interacting with politicians, and having to “convince different political parties that [approving a policy or project] is in the best interest of the city”. Eric finds that what works for him is to be persistent and to “find more creative ways of getting enough people to say yes”, so that the policy or project can go through. And although convincing politicians takes a lot of work, for Eric this is not a political exercise – it is a community exercise when the policy or project is going “to improve the lives of the people in this community”.

He is proud of the policies emerging from his team and believes that the policies “are really transformational in nature” because they are “causing a lot of disturbances [...] in different circles”. For example, the inclusionary housing policy requires the private developers to include units for people in low income brackets, to ensure mixed income developments are achieved in well-located areas. His team is working on the nodal review project, which identifies areas where people

are able to live within a walking distance of their places of employment and other urban facilities such as education and health. This will involve increasing residential densities in and around these “nodes”, to encourage developments in that space. These policies all speak to Eric’s underlying motivation, which is “integrating the poor people in society”, so that they and their children will be able to flourish in life. A crucial element to achieving an inclusive city is community participation. Eric believes that instead of imposing ideas on people and telling them what is going to happen, it’s important to listen to the people tell you what is wrong with their environment and what must change because “we don’t live in that space, they do”.

What keeps Eric going is shaking up the environment. He is comfortable with people not being as comfortable as they used to be because “things have to change, and people have to be accommodated into the urban fabric regardless of their income or race or gender”. And that is the inclusive city that Eric aspires to achieve and see in the future.

THANDEKA MLAZA-LLOYD

Assistant Director, City Transformation and Spatial Planning, Department of Development Planning, City of Johannesburg

Thandeka grew up in Butterworth, in the Eastern Cape, with her mother and sisters. She feels that growing up in a small town has made her conservative and cautious in her approach to life – “I’m always the tentative one who always wants to [...] study my surroundings, get an understanding before I actually take a step”.

She sees herself as “not just a town planner who’s just here to earn a salary”, but as someone with a responsibility to “get an understanding of the reality out there and [...] to actually shape that”. At the risk of sounding corny, Thandeka says that what motivates her is a “zeal to make a difference” and the realisation that what she does “actually does impact someone’s life out there”.

She is learning the importance of getting out of the office in order to close the gap between the theory of development and the realities people face on the ground. She believes that language contributes to this gap because planners and communities do not speak the same language – “planning has a lot of buzzwords, a lot of terms”, and planners can end up becoming “this bubble that just talks and talks in this manner, [...] divorced from the realities of what we seek to transform”.

In a similar vein, Thandeka feels that officials need to get out of their individual bubbles and talk to each other – “we walk past each other every day, we just exist past each other every day [...] and have become very automated within our existence”, instead of finding out what’s happening in the lives of colleagues next door or in other departments.



My wish is to ensure that all the “20 000, 30 000 more other Thandeka's out there [...] get to be the Thandeka that [I am] today without having to go through some of the hurdles that [I have] been through”

She believes that everyone has the same goal – to deliver, and achieving that goal will require people to talk and pull together. Through talking together, people will be able to share their deliverables, their standard operating procedures or simply how to deliver what needs to be delivered; in other words, integrating what they do.

Thandeka's approach is to keep her head down and really work at her job. As the person responsible for metro-wide strategic spatial planning, she is conscious of the responsibility sitting on her shoulders and the implication of her work, which is more than just a job. For her, it is not only humbling but also “a bit scary” to realise that what she does “actually shapes someone's future at the end of the day”. Her daily challenge is getting out of her head and reminding herself that what she does at work is not for herself but for other people. Her aim is to do her best “to ensure that someone else out there has a fighting chance”.

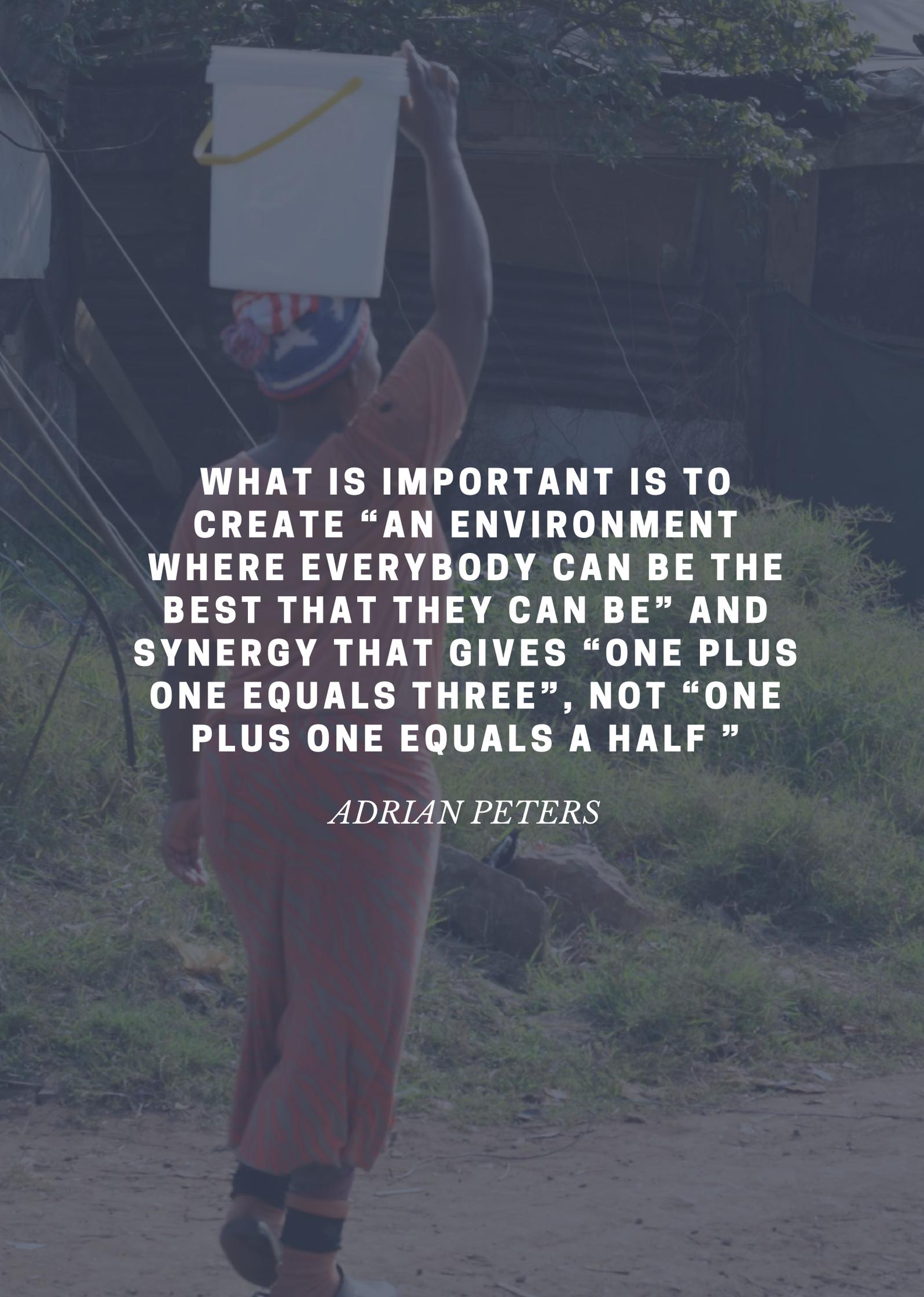
Growing up disadvantaged, far “from economic opportunities and the glitz and glam of the bigger cities” helps her to understand the adversities that other “little girl growing up in a small town” has to content with. Her wish is to ensure that all the “20 000, 30 000 more other Thandeka's out there [...] get to be the Thandeka that she is today without having to go through some of the hurdles that she has been through.

What gets Thandeka up in the morning is the desire to make a difference and to impact the lives of others because “when you've actually walked in those footsteps and seen what other people are going through out there, you want to make a difference”. She wants to be able to say “I was part of that, and I was part of that, and this is what it translated to”.



TASK TEAM MEETINGS

INSTEAD OF MEETING IN HOTELS WE ARE MEETING IN PLACES WHERE YOU CAN SEE THE GRAVITY OF THE CHALLENGE AND YOU CAN IMMERSE YOURSELF IN THE CONTEXT- THE VENUE IS A PARTICIPANT



**WHAT IS IMPORTANT IS TO
CREATE “AN ENVIRONMENT
WHERE EVERYBODY CAN BE THE
BEST THAT THEY CAN BE” AND
SYNERGY THAT GIVES “ONE PLUS
ONE EQUALS THREE”, NOT “ONE
PLUS ONE EQUALS A HALF ”**

ADRIAN PETERS



SIYABONGA BAKUMENI-KAKAZA

**Head of Department , Enterprise Project
Management Office, Buffalo City Metropolitan
Municipality**

Siyabonga grew up in King William's Town. He was born in the Ginsberg township, where life was "full of activities", playing in the streets and being creative "basically in doing a lot of things for ourselves", and then moved to Westbank, and attended primary and high school in Bhisho. He believes that growing up in a township shaped him, making him determined, focused and goal oriented. As a child, his ambition was to become a policeman or traffic officer, so that he drives a vehicle with sirens and chase after people who

are in the wrong side of the law. However, Siyabonga changed his mind at school, when an assignment to research various professions led him to discover "this thing called an engineer". He learned that engineering was "all about problem solving, infrastructure needs, economic needs", which interested him. He was a top maths, science and biology student at school and obtained a bursary to study civil engineering at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. It was at university that he was exposed for the first time to a multiracial environment, which sparked his competitive spirit and resulted in him being the first black civil engineering student to graduate cum laude. He went on to do a BSc Honours in applied sciences in transportation planning at the University of

“It is a very strenuous exercise. Life at work. Life at home with family. Life with different integration task teams and life on the road.”

Pretoria and is currently studying a Master’s of Engineering (MEng) – Civil Engineering – Transportation with Stellenbosch University. After several years working in the public and private sector, in 2014 Siyabonga joined the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality. Two years later, he was appointed acting Head of Department (HOD) and became the actual HOD in 2019. He enjoys the challenges of working at a municipality, where “you’re at the actual coalface of what’s happening”, and so “when people are fed up with service delivery, they will come straight at you and they expect you to have solutions and answers”. He understands the frustrations of communities, when they are told that a project will take another two years after promises from government for 25 years of democracy, and believes that officials need to “cascade the information to the person on the ground”, to explain that local government is obliged to act within legislative and fiscal restrictions, but yet deliver the required.

Siyabonga is a problem solver at heart, and his greatest satisfaction is finding solutions for people in need, such as building a road through difficult, mountainous terrain that will make life easier for communities. Or investigating why a newly built road is deteriorating and how to resolve the problem,

even if corruption is at the root of the problem as he has done technical forensic investigations before. The downside of his job is being away from his family, as he is not often at home during the week – “It is a very strenuous exercise. Life at work. Life at home with family. Life with different integration task teams and life on the road”.

As a young leader, Siyabonga has to manage people who are older, which can be a challenge, but his solution is to lead by example, putting in many hours at work. This influences his team, as “some people pick it up and feel like maybe they should do the same to ensure that their work is deliverable”. He has learned to be patient and to listen, and to remind his team that their department is “a centre of excellence for the institution”. What motivates him is solving problems, “activating things [...] being focal [...] and driving things until their destination”.

For Siyabonga, the foundation of success is a good work ethic – “be punctual, be there on time at work, be there on time in your meetings, be opinionated as far as you can, have a lot of input into discussions [...] make your voice heard”; and lastly, teach others to be leaders as well and help through the process.

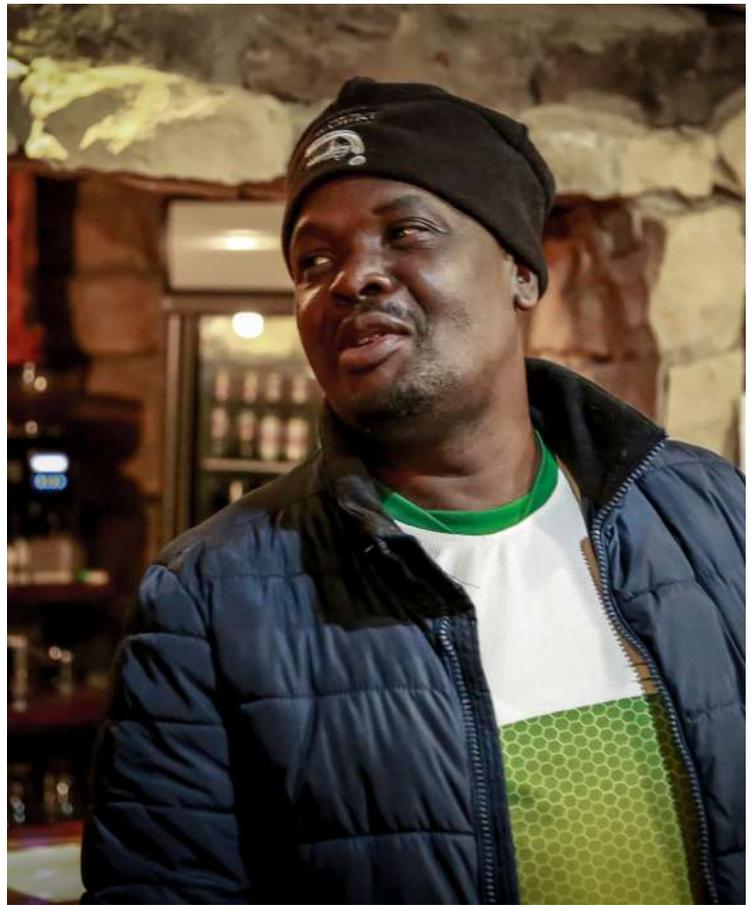
DENNIS MADUMO

Director of Spatial Planning, Economic Development and Spatial Planning Department, City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality

Dennis considers himself “a rural boy”, having spent most of his childhood in his father’s village, Katjibane in Limpopo, which is about 23 kilometres from Warmbaths.

During the school holidays, Dennis would travel to Johannesburg, where his mother worked for an engineering firm based in Doornfontein, opposite Wits Technikon (now University). The firm provided engineering services and worked closely with town planners. Dennis would visit his mother at work and was fascinated by the large maps that hung on the walls or were laid out on tables. “I would [...] start to ask questions: What are these maps? Where do they come from? And then patiently they would explain to me that these are layout plans”, he recalls fondly. He would also question the town planners visiting the company about what town planning involved.

The experience at his mother’s employer changed his initial plan of studying mining engineering, which he had already applied to study at Wits. Luckily there was space available for town planning. After completing a three-year diploma in town planning at Wits, Dennis worked in the private sector – “I started doing the in-service training and ended up in a private company in Pretoria. [...] That’s where I started my journey as a town planner.” In 2003, he moved to the public sector, working for the City of Johannesburg and then Madibeng local municipality. In 2008, he joined the City of Tshwane as a town planner and has steadily moved up the ranks, to deputy director and now director responsible for spatial planning.



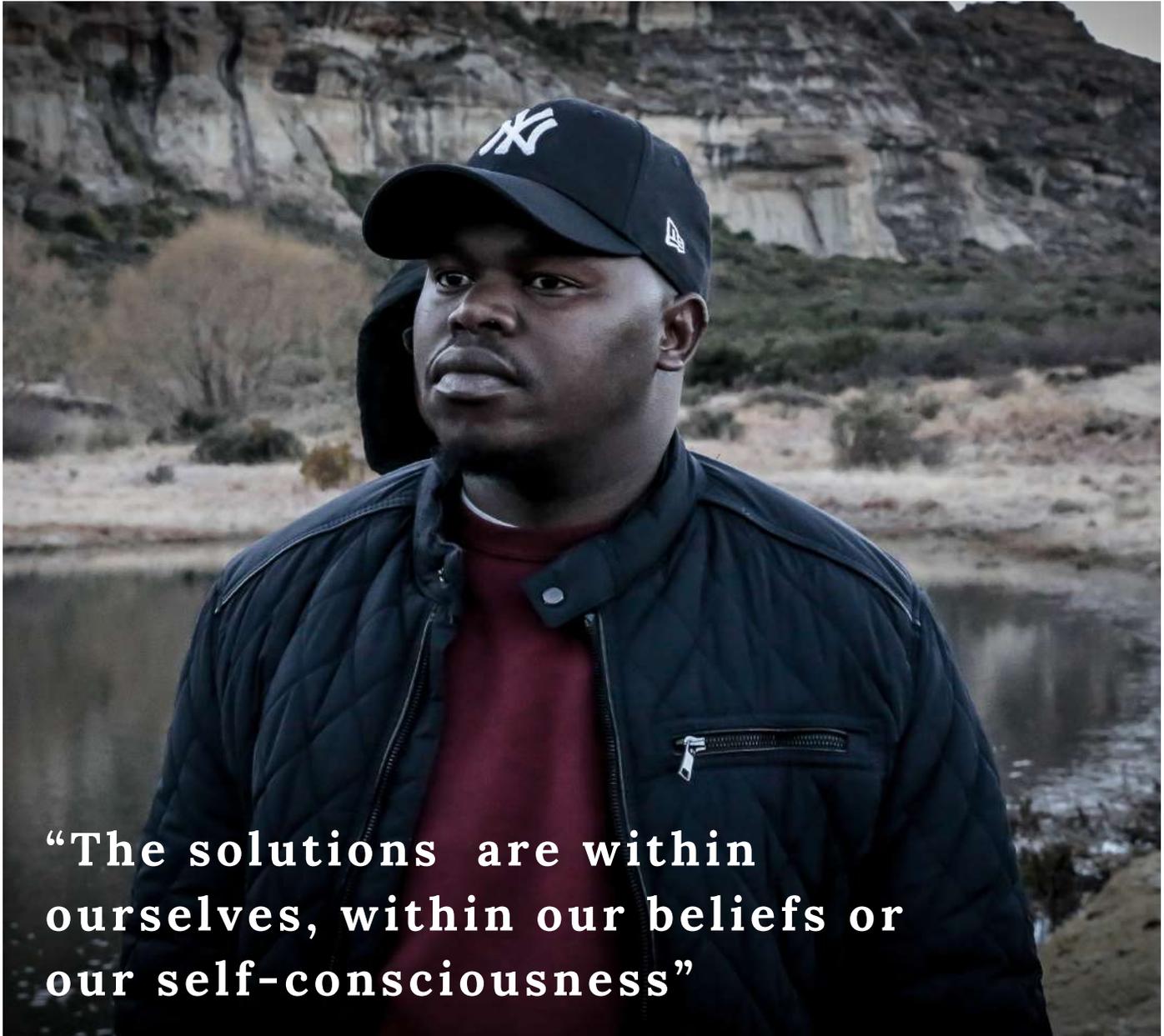
“You don’t start developing the policies from the top, but you start from the bottom”

Dennis applies what he learned in rural areas when formalising informal settlements. He remembers how in rural villages, “if you want a stand, the Chief will just say: ‘this is your stand’, and then you start to do those measurements, not even using a tape but using your legs to say more or less one metre”. He is mindful of the work that people have put into building permanent structures in informal settlements and accommodates them where possible, even if it means having “very funny stands [such as one] that is not a four-corner stand”. It also costs less to accommodate people than to move them. An ongoing challenge is resource allocation and finding funding for certain projects because “you know that they can assist in terms of spatial transformation”.

Things have improved since the introduction of the Built Environment Performance Plan, which Dennis manages. For example, it ensured that sufficient funding was allocated for rehabilitating the Centurion Lake, which is something that Dennis is proud of.

Dennis believes that it is important to understand what is happening on the ground, rather than simply develop spatial planning and policies in the office. Therefore, his department is now doing things differently. “You don’t start developing the policies from the top, but you start from the bottom”, he explains, adding that “whatever the input that you receive from that community or from those individuals informs the policy”. As an example, the review of the gated community policy included speaking to people working in these communities about the impact on their travel time.

Every morning, Dennis asks himself, “What are the small steps that I can start to take to ensure that spatial transformation is achieved”. He likes to share his experience with others and to learn what other municipalities are doing in the realm of spatial transformation: “It will obviously not be the same solution as here [...] but at least you have learned something that you say something different can be done in your space”.



“The solutions are within ourselves, within our beliefs or our self-consciousness”

GEORGE LEBELO

Manager Forward Planning, Msunduzi Municipality

For George, “planning is a calling. It’s not just a matter of getting a salary”. His choice of profession was influenced by his early life and the startling contrast between where he spent his early life (Ngobi, a poor rural village in the Moretele Municipality, North West Province, that still has no running water) and where his family moved to when he reached schooling age (Hammenskraal, Gauteng, 80 kilometres from Ngobi).

He started to ask himself, “why do people have to live like this?” Then at school, he discovered a love for geography, in particular population geography, which included the movement of people and urbanisation. Town planning was a natural career choice for him, as it enables him to make changes for the good of the people.

George became a planner to better people’s lives and is guided by his strong professional ethics. He believes in speaking truth to power, standing his ground and doing what is right. This is why he avoids politics and does not compromise, whatever the circumstances.



George is optimistic that South Africa and local government can do better, if the basics are done right, and it does not have to take 10 or 40 years: “We just have to be positive and prioritise what it is that we want as people, as a country and as an organisation”, he says. The challenges are many, but George has realised the power of talking in finding that “the solutions [that] are within ourselves, within our beliefs or our self-consciousness”. This also requires improved coordination, communications and engagement, especially in those institutions where the senior managers and junior staff never meet. For him, engaging means not being scared to ask but being brave enough to question and challenge authority in order to get clarity, while also having the courage to be wrong.

For George, success should not be measured based on the car you drive or the house you live in, but rather on the impact that you have had on the “life of ordinary citizens or the life of somebody that is unable to tap into where you are now”. At some point in his life, George’s dream is to return home, to Moretele, and “take care of the people that really made me to be the planner today”.

In one incident, a senior manager asked him to sign off on something that was illegal, and he refused, even though he could have lost his job. Despite being threatened with insubordination and suspension, George’s consciousness did not allow him to cross the line. In the end, he did not lose his job, although he did take some time off to recharge.

What really troubles him is that, despite all the resources available, people still have no water and have to travel far to access opportunities. He wonders, given that there is so much money out there, “why are we failing to really, really take care of certain individuals?”. Therefore, what gets him up in the morning is the drive to see things happening.





DAWN MCCARTHY

Senior Director Strategic Planning and Coordination, Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality

Dawn was born and grew up in the City of Johannesburg. She studied Town and Regional Planning at Wits University, and chose this profession because town planning “satisfied a number of things [...] it was technical and social [...] and creative”.

However, it was only once she started working that she realised the huge impact of town planning on people’s lives.

For Dawn, it is not just a desk job but a way of making a difference, “in my experience over the years, you learn that you really have the ability through what you do to make a real difference in people’s lives”. And, although Dawn now works at a strategic level, rather than at project level, she continues to make a difference through “understanding strategic issues and analysing them, working with budgets, working with allocations”, which she finds very gratifying and rewarding.

Dawn’s job may mean that she is more distant from communities, but the teams that she works with work directly with the communities.

“The issues that we’re experiencing in our city are not isolated to our city, and everybody is trying to deal with those challenges in a particular way”

She feels it important to get to know the people she works with, to share their experiences and to listen. Her experience has taught her that everyone has a broader responsibility to the team and to the project – “your profession and where you work is not your only responsibility”.

The result is a strong built environment performance team, although it has taken time for people to “learn and understand their role in programmes and projects, so they can make a difference”. However, they are now aware of the importance of involving communities in the early stages of a project and of managing their expectations, which are usually high, to avoid disappointment. Everyone needs to understand that “we are all in this boat together and [...] the limitations to what we can do”, she explains. Fundamental to building strong teams are tolerance, understanding, communication and the ability to listen.

What is reassuring for Dawn is that cities throughout the country are grappling with the same issues relating to the legislative, national and provincial environments, and high levels of poverty.

“The issues that we’re experiencing in our city are not isolated to our city”, and “everybody is trying to deal with those challenges in a particular way”. Nevertheless, the challenges are many, including dealing with the political-administrative interface, budgeting in a financially constrained environment and working within the municipal institutional culture where collaboration across departments is not embedded.

Despite these challenges, Dawn thrives on bringing together people from diverse directorates around a common agenda, and is confident in her ability to produce “a coherent understanding of what the challenges are, in order to chart a way forward”.

What drives Dawn is knowing that she can make a difference. Giving up and walking away is not an option. “I absolutely believe that the work we’re doing is critically important – you have to do it, and I want to do it.”



“I really think that we underestimate the ability of communities to bring some capital on the table.”

ADRIAN PETERS

Chief Strategy Officer at the eThekweni Municipality

“My story is really quite simple,” says Adrian, “I grew up in a council housing scheme, in a place called Northdale, Pietermaritzburg [...] and have worked for the eThekweni Municipality (formerly the Durban Corporation) for going on 30 years”.

For most of his childhood, Adrian’s family lived from hand to mouth. His father was the sole breadwinner and suffered from cardiac problems at a time when no-work/no-pay was the norm.

It was a tough life, but the community spirit was strong. Northdale, which was reserved for Indians under the Group Areas Act, was a poor yet close-knit community that valued education. “Education was extremely important in the community that I came from” and families “made sure their kids went to school and learnt”, Adrian recalls.

From a young age, Adrian dreamt of becoming an engineer, as he was fascinated by how things were built and thinking about how they could have been built better from a community perspective.

His first choice was to study aeronautical engineering at Stellenbosch, but relocating to the Western Cape was not financially possible following the death of his father a week before his matric exams. Instead, he studied civil engineering “because the Durban Corporation wanted civil engineers” and gave him a bursary, as well as the opportunity to do work that he loves.

Adrian’s approach to work is strongly influenced by his experience of growing up in a family and neighbourhood with strong values – “it was very clear about what was important, what was not important, what was acceptable and good behaviour, and what was not acceptable and bad behaviour”. He believes that communities should be active, not passive, and involved in doing things for themselves: “I really think that we underestimate the ability of communities to bring capital to the table. [...] There is a wealth of talent that we don’t necessarily tap into.”

Even after 30 years, he still gets a thrill when he can spend time out of the office and in the field interacting with communities. Hearing from people in an informal settlement about how they are starting to grow crops or set up creches makes up for the challenges of working within a demanding municipal system. The reward is “when you go out to a community having delivered with them on something that they’ve conceived themselves and you see the expressions on people’s faces”.

His biggest challenge is getting colleagues to move in the same direction and to do things differently, based on analytics and data. Departments need to collaborate and align their work, and we all should spend more time engaging with communities, to better understand their needs, instead of debating how to improve lives in air-conditioned offices. What is missing is the right leadership, which is something the municipality has struggled with. As Adrian points out, “We have had quite a lot of changes in our administrative leadership”, and so it’s been difficult to get the same commitment from top management, which also “sort of undermines what I’m trying to do”.

Despite these frustrations, Adrian is not deterred. He believes that what is important is to create “an environment where everybody can be the best that they can be” and where synergy gives “one plus one equals three or more”, not “one plus one equals a half”. His motivation is to make a difference on the ground: “I want to know that when I die, [...] people say that that was a life well lived” and he concludes, “I want to know that I’ve made a difference and I made a difference on the ground”.



SHAAKIRA CHOHAN

**Former Development Manager,
Johannesburg Development Agency**

Growing up in a very small town called Azaadville on the West Rand, Shaakira's most vivid memory was "that feeling of being stuck; feeling like I needed to get out in order to grow; feeling like I need to go beyond what I was given if I was to see the world". As a result of the Group Areas Act, the predominantly Indian community was isolated and marginalised, with access to only basic facilities, but did have a strong sense of community.

Shaakira believes that "an environment can fundamentally change a person's destiny and a person's life" and that "a healthy, thriving environment will breed a healthy, thriving individual". In her case, the sense of community and empathy for people pulls through into her work, which is not simply about development, infrastructure or planning but about "building and creating places of meaning, places of destination, places of sharing and engagement". For her, the key to building successful cities is collaboration and co-creation, "not only with communities, but with each other, between departments, between cities, between sectors".

"you can't be too sensitive and you can't let it get to you too much"

A qualified architect, Shaakira chose to work in "the space of public service and urban development to bring change", with the intention of serving and empowering communities. However, the reality was not so simple, as she learned through her involvement in a project in Noordgesig. The municipality had put in a BRT station without checking how the community uses the space, so the station ended up "separating a community" and, as people visit relatives on the other side of the road, creating "an unsafe crossing". The community was mistrustful and dissatisfied.

The community was mistrustful and saw Shaakira as "the face of a system" that comes into communities to tell them what they need. She became the "point of attack" and received personal sexist and racist threats. It was a traumatic time, but it also showed her the divides that exist, between an "us" and "them", and between "projects being seen as a tool" rather than an asset and investment. And it changed her approach to working with communities - "you can't be too sensitive and you can't let it get to you too much [...] you have to meet the community on what it is that they're actually upset about".

She learned the importance of being authentic, of being honest about the project's intentions, and helping the community to understand "the value of the work that we were doing, their role in it and how they can contribute to it". Now, when she goes into the community, she is well received and greeted by people in the street - "it shows that we were able to break down those barriers of 'us and them' and were able to just see each other for humans that want to support each other".

Shaakira would like to see cities measure impact differently. Evaluating progress using only a scoresheet may give the impression that "we're doing a lot of amazing, great work and everything is smooth running", but does not show whether we are "impacting lives , [...], growing small economies of scale, [...]" "assessing the social impact". Adopting a more qualitative methodology would "change the way we are doing work" and enable cities "to address the more softer qualities and improve the quality of life, which is essentially at the essence of what we should be doing".

What drives Shaakira is her belief in humans and their "ability to change not only their own lives but the lives around them through authenticity", and the importance of creating places where people feel safe, empowered, alive and enlivened.

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04 PLANTING SEEDS

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05 CITOPOLY BOARD GAME

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