

Banal management practices kill innovation and creativity at the centre of spatial transformation

City Press

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Experimentation and innovation are critical for finding solutions to the incredibly complex urban challenges our cities are facing. Picture: iStock/Gallo Images

VOICES

If you were to look at the overall performance reports of municipal officials, you would struggle to find signs of underperformance.

It would appear as though municipal practitioners are doing well to meet their cities' annual targets. And perhaps they are, but why are we not seeing evidence of this in society?

The same is true for officials working in built environment departments – planners, urban designers, transport engineers and housing specialists, all of whom are meant to be advancing an agenda of spatial transformation.

From their performance reports, it would appear that plans are on track, housing is being delivered and transport systems are being upgraded. And perhaps they are, but why are we not seeing evidence of any real kind of spatial transformation in any city in South Africa?

The SA Cities Network recently initiated a project called Rules of The Game to investigate this

question and unpack how the current performance management system is distracting city officials from the important work of spatial transformation.

The aim of the project is in no way to accuse city officials of underperformance. On the contrary, it sees the entire institutional system as having a set of rules – both official and unofficial – which incentivise officials to behave in a certain way if they are to comply with their institutions' way of doing things.

Ashraf Adam, the chief executive of the Mandela Bay Development Agency, wrote a piece last year in The Herald on a similar issue.

When it comes to community engagement, the legislation through which this is done – the integrated development plan – can itself be reduced to a compliance-based exercise.

He argued that performance management is at the heart of mediocrity in municipalities, due to unambitious and banal targets being set that are easy to meet and thus easy to be rewarded for.

The SA Cities Network report is of a similar sentiment – simplistic, quantitative targets are set to reward safe and uncreative behaviour, often at the expense of the innovation and creativity that is needed to create sustainable and integrated cities.

We are seeing a disjuncture between organisational value (such as achieving clean audit reports as well as expenditure, output and time targets) and societal value (such as spatial transformation and economic development).

The performance of individuals, departments and projects is measured in a way that overtly prioritises organisational value over societal value.

Issues such as intergovernmental and interdepartmental isolation as well as weak community engagement can be traced back to the institutional rules which prioritise a technocratic and siloed way of operating, which limits the ability for practitioners to act creatively or collaboratively to achieve spatial integration.

Through the Rules of The Game project, we wanted to understand how the rules are set.

A large part of this is understanding how the key performance indicators end up on the individual and organisational performance plans for cities' built environment departments in the first place.

There are many different forces at play – the apex planning document is the integrated development plan, which is a five-year plan developed with communities at a ward level and reviewed every year.

The targets of the integrated development plan are meant to cascade into the service delivery and budget implementation plan, which is the annual plan for what needs to get done in a municipality.

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How integrated development plan targets get translated and prioritised into the service delivery and budget implementation plan, however, is often subject to changing political interests and competing development projects.

Conditional grants from National Treasury also determine what ends up in the service delivery and budget implementation plan.

That plan is then cascaded into the senior managers' scorecards. But, unbelievably, senior managers are the very people responsible for putting together the service delivery and budget implementation plan, in collaboration with the municipal manager, so the plan is often manipulated into stipulating less ambitious targets to ensure that they are easily met and that managers get their bonuses.

Furthermore, the plan can be revised halfway through the year, giving people a chance to adjust their targets if their projects are not delivering.

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Often what is reported on are whether integrated development plan meetings are held and the number of participants who attend.

We need to change the institutional culture in our municipalities. We need to be rewarding practice that is trying to improve the quality of life for residents.

There is no measure of representation across wards or the quality of engagement.

Fear of failure and a blame-game mentality have created a culture where playing it safe is the default state of play. But experimentation and innovation are critical to finding solutions to the incredibly complex urban challenges our cities are facing.

We need to change the institutional culture in our municipalities. We need to be rewarding practice that is trying to improve the quality of life for residents.

[Rules of the Game Report](#) by [CityPress](#) on Scribd

We need to be guided by a comprehensive theory of change, which measures outcome and impact rather than administrative compliance.

We need a performance management system that measures contributions to long-term planning goals aligned to the National Development Plan and city growth and development strategies for long-term spatial transformation.

We need a system that creates leeway for failure so that innovation and experimentation are celebrated. And when we do fail, we need a performance management system that, instead of punishing officials, is able to process the lessons so that we can institutionally and individually learn and grow forward.

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