Voices from the Frontline: eThekwini Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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<tr>
<td><strong>4IR</strong> Fourth Industrial Revolution</td>
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<td><strong>CSP</strong> City Support Programme</td>
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<td><strong>DDM</strong> District Development Model</td>
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<td><strong>Exco</strong> Executive Committee</td>
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<td><strong>GDP</strong> Gross Domestic Product</td>
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<td><strong>IDP</strong> Integrated Development Plan</td>
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<td><strong>JOC</strong> Joint Operations Centre</td>
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<td><strong>KZN</strong> KwaZulu-Natal</td>
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<td><strong>LTDF</strong> Long Term Development Framework</td>
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<td><strong>MDTT</strong> Multi-Disciplinary Task Team</td>
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<td><strong>MILE</strong> Municipal Institute of Learning</td>
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<td><strong>MS</strong> Microsoft Teams</td>
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<td><strong>UCLG</strong> United Cities and Local Government</td>
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Introduction

Cities are central to transforming and improving the lives of South Africans. With high and increasing levels of urbanisation, the key developmental challenges of South African cities need to be urgently addressed in order to significantly reduce poverty, inequality and unemployment. Effective city governance is an often-unacknowledged pre-requisite for achieving South Africa’s developmental objectives.

This case study represents the governance story in eThekwini Municipality that was developed and informed through engagements with municipal officials and politicians, and representatives from civil society and academia. Unlike the other city case studies, this one does not feature a physical, tangible project. Instead, it shines a spotlight on eThekwini Municipality’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic and alert level 5 lockdown.

Like other South African cities, eThekwini Municipality quickly responded to national government’s detailed COVID-19 guidelines and policies. It set up the Joint Operations Centre (JOC), to coordinate and implement health and safety initiatives, and the COVID-19 War Room, to take decisions and give direction on COVID-19 matters relating to the municipality’s staff, citizens and operations. However, most interesting was the establishment of a Multi-Disciplinary Task Team (MDTT), to provide technical expertise for setting up organisational structures, preventing the spread of COVID, managing risk and communications, and implementing War Room recommendations.

The case study attempts to understand how the municipality responded, in particular during March and April 2020 (alert level 5). Insights into local governance are provided by critically examining how the municipality engaged with the other government spheres and mobilised its partners and stakeholders, as well as its ability to unlock the resources of its own system, the flexibility and agility of its structures to respond creatively, and the willingness of its staff to go beyond the call of duty during this crucial time. Therefore, the focus is only on the municipality’s initial response and not on its later economic recovery processes, which are receiving accolades as international good practice from the World Bank.¹

The municipal response is viewed through a governance lens, which allows for an in-depth understanding of the complex nature of governance in a metropolitan area, with its contestations, struggles, victories and opportunities. Rather than reflect only on the last five years, the case study also considers the long-term and what the COVID-19 response revealed about the governance systems in place since the birth of democratic local government in 2000. Therefore, although the narrative draws on personal experiences of the response to COVID, in particular to the homeless during the lockdown, the strategic reflections are much broader and extrapolate to the entire governance experience of the last 20 years.

Municipal Overview and Contextualisation

Technical Considerations

Located in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), the eThekwini Municipality covers an area of approximately 2297 km² and is home to nearly four million people (eThekwini Municipality, 2020). In 2012, its gross domestic product (GDP) was R210-billion (in constant 2005 prices), contributing 65.5% of KZN’s GDP and 10.7% of South Africa’s GDP (eThekwini Municipality, 2013). Durban contributes approximately 55% of the KZN GDP, or about 15% of the South African GDP, while the port and its related industries are estimated to contribute more than 20% of Durban’s GDP.² The municipality is known for its subtropical weather, with almost 320 days of sunshine per year, and boasting (eThekwini Municipality, 2011: 52):

- 63 114 hectares of open space;
- 18 catchments;
- 17 estuaries;
- 4000 km of rivers which provides approximately R3 billion in value for core ecological/biodiversity assets that deliver free environment goods and services to residents per annum (assessed in 2002).

Over the last 20 years, the municipality has had an impressive track-record of service delivery, rolling out basic infrastructure and services in an attempt to redress historical inequalities. For example, by 2013 the municipality had rolled out approximately 2500 new water connections, 10 000 new sanitation connections, 13 000 electricity connections and refuse removal to 2000 units (eThekwini Municipality, 2013).

Its detailed economic development plans acknowledge the challenge of unemployment and inequality (eThekwini Municipality, 2011: 53).

² http://www.durban.gov.za/City_Services/Economic_Development/Sector_Support/Port_City/Pages/default.aspx
The number of people living in extreme poverty in the eThekwini Municipality area has increased, mostly affecting black Africans and this is a result of a legacy of apartheid and racial exclusion which created poverty gaps, wealth disparities and inequality between racial groups.

The municipality has managed to improve its credit rating to AA with a positive outlook and achieved an unqualified audit in 2019, despite facing complex challenges such as the water deficit, unfunded mandates, flat growth in its rates base and the impact of the pandemic. The municipality’s latest Integrated Development Plan (IDP) identifies the following challenges: (eThekwini Municipality, 2020: Section 1.24)

- High rates of unemployment and low economic growth
- High levels of poverty
- Low levels of skills development and literacy
- Limited access to basic household and community services
- Increased incidents of HIV/AIDS and communicable diseases
- Loss of natural capital
- Unsustainable developmental practices
- High levels of crime and risk
- Ensuring adequate energy and water supply
- Ensuring food security
- Infrastructure degradation
- Climate change
- Ensuring financial sustainability.

To respond to these challenges, the municipality’s vision is to create “Africa’s most caring and liveable city” and to deliver on its vision through an 8-point plan (ibid: 337).

Figure 1: eThekwini Municipality’s 8-Point Plan

![Figure 1: eThekwini Municipality’s 8-Point Plan](source)

The eThekwini Municipality has a comprehensive land-use management system for the entire municipal area. A key aspect of the system is the “Planning and Development Management Toolbox” which includes a package of plans that informs the municipality’s social, economic, environmental and infrastructural development. The package involves an integrated and iterative process and covers municipal-wide strategic plans, from the 20-year Long Term Development Framework (LTDF) and five-year IDP, down to detailed local level plans and land-use schemes (Figure 2).
Governance Overview

Over the past two decades, eThekwini Municipality has had an uneven and complicated governance history. After the intense political contestation and violent conflict of the 1980s and 1990s, negotiations and compromise resulted in the region entering a phase of stability before and after the first local government elections in 2000. During the first decade post-2000, the municipality was renowned internationally for being a well-run city and a leader in urban planning and governance. During this period, the municipality adopted a progressive, bottom-up planning and development approach. In particular, eThekwini’s strategic planning process was shaped by a strong participatory approach, part of which involved “adjusting budget splits – the proportion to be spent on different council priorities” (Robinson, 2007: 9). Other unique characteristics of eThekwini’s bold and innovative planning processes included the “fostering of partnerships with key stakeholders in the community in order to develop strong ties of trust, engaging political leadership, working with schoolchildren, taking risks and experimenting and embracing new opportunities” (Moodley, 2020: 100027).

During the 2000s, eThekwini was emblematic of good planning, service delivery and effective governance, and played an active leadership role in international networks such as the PLUS NETWORK, United Cities and Local Government (UCLG) and NEPAD Cities. Many of its good practices were shared not only with its African counterparts but also with cities in the global South and beyond. However, over time (and in particular from 2015) the municipality suffered serious legitimacy crises, as it grappled with political stability and charges of alleged fraud and corruption levelled at its highest political and administrative leadership.3

eThekwini on the Edge?

This governance overview draws on “eThekwini on the Edge”, a short discussion report prepared by the City Planning Commission (2016) that provides a useful high-level assessment of the municipality’s state of governance. A major finding of the report was that the scale of complex challenges facing the city appeared to be beyond the capacity of any single organisation to address effectively. Drafted exactly 15 years after the adoption of the highly inclusive LTDF, which was recognised as an international good practice, the report lamented that the municipality no longer had a strong record of working in collaboration with its key sectors. More worrisome was the suggestion that the municipality was pursuing its own agenda rather than a collective vision, and external relationships were being neglected. What was desperately needed was a shared vision for the city, with intensive dialogue, mutual learning and cooperation across civil society, business, labour, knowledge institutions and various parts of government.

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State Capability

The report revealed an implicit (and questionable) assumption that the municipality had the knowledge and capabilities to develop the economy and transform social conditions by itself, whereas the complex and unpredictable governance environment requires a much broader approach. eThekwini would need to prioritise the strengthening of its relationships with other actors, if it was serious about rebuilding the trust of its citizenry and harnessing the energy, creativity and resources within the broader society. The report highlighted some crucial intergovernmental issues (City Planning Commission, 2016: 21):

[R]relationships with provincial government and surrounding municipalities have also suffered from insular thinking from all quarters. Tensions and conflict between the province and metro have been particularly damaging. Internal political divisions and factionalism within the ruling party are part of the problem. Recent differences have attracted national media attention and done nothing to improve Durban’s reputation as a well-run city.

At the same time, the report acknowledged that some departments were highly competent and innovative, while others suffered from the departure of highly skilled people and the unwinding of progressive programmes. As a result, the quality of policy and practice was “very patchy across the municipality, with insufficient cross-fertilisation of ideas and joint working” (ibid: 21). The IDP had potential but did not function as the coordinating device envisaged in the legislation, had weak analytical foundations and was unable to influence departmental programmes – in effect, the IDP was more a compliance exercise than a real strategic plan of action.

Financial Governance

The report found that the City Treasurer exerted a big influence on departmental budgets and took a prudent and incremental budgeting approach. Municipal rates were collected very efficiently, and the municipality had one of the highest credit ratings in the country. However, the importance of this priority was questioned, given the city’s major socioeconomic needs.

City Governance

The report makes a strong linkage between strategy and city governance, suggesting that in the absence of an integrated strategy for eThekwini’s overall development, ad hoc initiatives appeared to capture the municipality’s attention. An exception was the preparation for the 2010 World Cup, which was “a rare example of how the whole municipality galvanised its collective effort around a clear and purposeful vision related to a single project, despite concerns that the benefits might be short-lived” (ibid: 22). Other governance decisions mentioned included the inappropriate privatisation of the municipal bus service, which caused disruption to regular users, and a street-renaming exercise, which may have harmed the municipality’s reputation among certain groups of residents.

Since the 2016 report, eThekwini Municipality has suffered severe reputational damage as a result of institutional challenges around political and administrative leadership. Any story about the state of governance in eThekwini has to include the removal of the former mayor facing charges of corruption and the replacement of the Exco with a new political leadership team that was elected in September 2019. The official statement from the ANC noted that “the reasons for her [the mayor] and Exco being removed have little to do with her arrest and much more to do with the general assessment of the performance of the municipality”.

Four years after the 2016 report suggested that eThekwini Municipality was “on the edge”, it may be argued that the recent institutional challenges (changing political and administrative leadership, loss of experienced senior managers and an inability to galvanise around a single common vision) have brought the municipality to the tipping point. Yet, as the governance story will show, the new leadership team appears to have brought a sense of renewed political confidence and optimism.

Administrative Leadership

Exactly one year after the arrest of the former mayor, the city manager appeared in court following his arrest by the Hawks for alleged tender fraud. Although this issue was not probed during the interviews, these disruptions undoubtedly not only affected the administration’s internal stability but also dealt a blow to the city’s credibility internationally. At the time of writing this report, the deputy city manager: Governance had assumed the acting position of the city manager and has attempted to rise to the challenge of restoring much-needed administrative stability.

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5 https://mg.co.za/article/2020-03-10-r50000-bail-for-durban-city-manager/
The eThekwini Governance Story

The story of municipal governance in eThekwini, like in other metros, is complicated. The case study attempts to understand this complexity better and to appreciate the struggles, challenges and opportunities that have confronted the governance actors in eThekwini.

In December 2000, the dawn of local democracy heralded the promise of a new way of doing things, in “the new spirit of developmental local government” (eThekwini Municipality, 2001: 15). Enabled by the White Paper on Local Government (1998), the LTDF was developed through a highly participative process and laid a solid foundation for a democratic and developmental local government. It outlined the new 20-year vision for eThekwini and firmly embedded a commitment to good governance principles, as the then Mayor Mlaba explained in the foreword (eThekwini Municipality, 2001):

> The preparation of this Long-Term Development Framework is indeed a critical milestone in the transformation process of our city. With the “transitional phase” of local government now behind us, this document lays the foundation for a new democratic and developmental local government. A local government that is responsive to peoples’ social and economic needs, and is transparent and accountable.

The intention of building a developmental local government was sustained through including a separate chapter on good governance in each of the four IDPs, which were the strategic vehicle for achieving the 2020 vision (Figure 3). However, as most South African cities can attest, translating well-intentioned strategic documents into progressive governance practices remained a challenge.

Figure 0: The long-term planning and governance trajectory in eThekwini

![Figure 0: The long-term planning and governance trajectory in eThekwini](image)

Source: Author

The White Paper on Local Government (1998) contains principles for municipalities to be the third independent sphere, working to deliver integrated services in concert not only with other spheres of government but also in strong partnerships with citizens. The eThekwini story (like that of many other municipalities) shows that the reality is much more complicated. The creation of a new District Development Model (DDM) to better align service delivery among spheres of government can be seen as an acknowledgment of the complexities of intergovernmental relations in practice, and the selection of the eThekwini Municipality as one of the pilots for roll-out in 2020 makes an interesting ‘book-end’ in the municipality’s governance trajectory.

In 2020, exactly 20 years since the birth of local democracy, Mayor Kaunda acknowledges the gains made but hints at the work still required to strengthen multi-stakeholder collaboration and recognises the opportunity presented by the COVID-19 pandemic (eThekwini Municipality, 2020: vii).

In the past 20 years significant progress has been made to ensure that our city deepens democracy, radically transforms economic development and continues to deliver efficient and effective provision of basic services to many of the citizens of our city. Amidst various challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on the municipality, the city continues to unwaveringly deliver on its mandate. The pandemic also offers the municipality an opportunity to find new and innovative ways of delivering services, this includes strengthening multi-stakeholder collaboration.
Lessons from Cooperative Governance Theme

Interactions between the spheres of government during the response to COVID-19 illustrate the messy nature of urban governance, and the complexities and contestations around the politics of intergovernmental relations. While the intergovernmental challenges were very real, genuine cooperation across the spheres also appeared during the national crisis. This was a clear demonstration that, under certain conditions, government can move beyond the mere rhetoric of ‘joined up’ government to deliver services in an integrated, effective and efficient manner.

Yet, despite acknowledging this possibility of real cooperative governance, the bane of ‘unfunded mandates’, which has dogged local government for two decades, reared its head and complicated the narrative. The frustrations of municipal officials were real, as they grappled to respond to the needs of communities that were demanding services from their closest government sphere. These officials wanted to deliver on their developmental mandate but recognised that making any interventions that were not part of their municipal competence would have major compliance and audit implications.

At the same time, the eThekwini storyline emerging from the pandemic is one of hope and optimism. The manner in which the municipality and local stakeholders coalesced to respond to the homeless is nothing short of an international good practice and is an important highlight in the story. Of course, recognising the danger of complacency, some protagonists want to push beyond notions of ‘partnership’, suggesting that true democracy involves more citizen-led community responses. They argue that civil society will need to consolidate its position and build on the gains made during the pandemic.

Figure 4: Lessons from the cooperative governance theme

1. The Complexities and Politics of Intergovernmental Relations

The pandemic provides many opportunities to reflect on intergovernmental relations, which is understandable, as the crisis demanded that local, provincial and national government departments and their political principals come together to respond quickly and in concert. As in any good story, there are many sides to the tale, with some that have differing views and others that share common ground.

Time taken to receive direction from national government

Many senior municipal officials lamented the time wasted waiting for direction from national government and felt that national government (and to some extent provincial government) had not learnt the meaning of true intergovernmental cooperation. An example of good practice cited was that of the 2010 FIFA World Cup, where
each sphere’s role was clearly understood and, more importantly, well respected. Some contributors felt strongly that, unfortunately, mutual respect was not a common feature during the initial period of level 5 lockdown.

National government did not provide timely guidance on how budgets would be approved. For example, 14 days were lost waiting for COGTA to develop a set of regulations to approve municipal budgets, during which time the municipality was unable to take any budgetary actions.

Of interest is that the core intergovernmental planning and implementation principles of the well-intentioned DDM were somehow not observed in the response to the pandemic. This was perhaps because government was in an emergency response mode and so missed the opportunity to truly embrace the DDM’s strategic intention.

‘Big brother’ mindset
The lack (or success) of cooperation among the spheres reflects at local level, which is where all spheres have a major impact. For example, provincial government is responsible for hospitals and some clinics, which has a profound impact on how health crises are handled at municipal level. Similarly, national government and/or parastatals are responsible for major economic activity, which directly affects how the city will function. Yet, despite this understanding and the legislative imperative of the Constitution in creating spheres of government, in reality the system operated in a top-down way, with very little regard for local government or the experience of local officials delivering in a time of crisis: “They just waiting for the next instruction because it’s just this top down, do this, or don’t do that […] or we’ll just come and do things.”

This view was not an isolated one, with one contributor describing national government as having a ‘big brother’ mindset. National government expected action from municipalities but did not always make available the support and assistance needed to achieve the outcomes. National government seemed to have little regard for the budgeting and the ability of local government to pivot and shift funds from one function to another function, which the nature of the pandemic required. The story also revealed a lack of clear understanding of the limitations to national government’s reach. It was reiterated that national government’s role was predominantly to develop policy and legislation, provide finance and help build the capacity of local government, not to deliver services. However, during the crisis, this was not how the functions appeared to play themselves out.

Balance of power
The eThekwini story also reflects local government’s ability to position itself, or at least engage robustly with other spheres of government. Local government appeared not to ‘stand up’ to national government’s decisions or demands, even when it was aware of a more appropriate solution that would have a better long-term impact or would not affect the municipality’s functioning going forward. This contradicts the notion of autonomous and distinct spheres of government that are meant to cooperate in order to deliver ‘joined-up government’ to citizens. Nevertheless, the city treasurer and other senior officials had a very positive intergovernmental experience with National Treasury and its City Support Programme (CSP), which played a proactive role. The creation of the weekly City Budget Forum was an innovative cooperative governance support mechanism that successfully brought together multiple government stakeholders working in different spheres and across sectors. Through this vehicle, process issues were translated into regulations that were ultimately able to be implemented and the working relationships among spheres actually improved.

Role of provincial government
Some contributors felt that some provincial departments were not as proactive and beneficial as anticipated. Some provincial departments worked independently without actively engaging the municipality or adding real substantive value during the crisis. For example, organising information webinars was not felt to be sufficiently tangible support that municipalities needed at that time. The eThekwini team, guided by its political leadership, could not wait for the provincial government to pronounce on how KZN municipalities should deal with their local COVID challenges. A case in point was the lack of clear directives from province to guide responses related to human settlements. More importantly, and especially in the early weeks of the lockdown, it was unclear how the funding from national government would be made available to support human settlements-related activities and whether these funds will be disbursed to the province or made available directly to the municipality.

Legislative and regulatory issues
During times of crisis, decisive political leadership can provide direction, stability and confidence. In eThekwini, the mayor and his deputy adopted a hands-on approach during the pandemic, with the mayor meeting online with the Executive Committee (Exco) on a continuous basis. However, despite being available and ready to lead, the political leadership (the Exco) was not legally empowered to do so because, in terms of the Disaster Management Act (No. 57 of 2002), all decision-making authority was transferred from Council to the city manager. This sweeping revocation of political power highlights the challenge of the rigidity and inflexibility of some of the current legislation that sets limits on council powers and functions.
Another challenge was the interpretation of regulations at a municipal level. For example, COGTA, municipalities and the unions interpreted differently the State President's return-to-work statements about one-third of the municipal workforce reporting for duty. The result was confusion, which hindered a smooth and expeditious return to work by staff. The insufficient attention paid to translating and interpreting legislation reveals a lack of coordination across the spheres of government.

The story of eThekwini’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic provided a unique opportunity to reflect on intergovernmental relations and how they play themselves out in reality, beyond the strategic statements of intent in legislation and policy documents. It highlights issues such as the balance of power, creative institutional mechanisms, varying levels of cooperation, and the legislative constraints that hinder devolved and better coordinated action.

Yet the intergovernmental relations narrative in eThekwini is far more complex than merely acknowledging the call for greater autonomy and flexibility. Another side of the story reveals an interesting and welcomed acceptance of the almost interventionist role of national government and its accompanying legislation.

2. A Real Demonstration that CRISIS Yields Intergovernmental Cooperation

Many contributors emphasised that the pandemic forced certain alliances and cooperation between the spheres of government that would never have materialised under ordinary circumstances. While at times the relations may have been strained and perceived by municipal officials as ‘big brother’ overtures, the spheres of government did in fact work together over time and managed to produce positive outcomes. This shows that intergovernmental cooperation can be effective but apparently only if it is demanded.

3. The Challenge of Unfunded Mandates

An important concern, which came to the fore repeatedly, was the seemingly irresolvable challenge of unfunded mandates that has persisted for two decades. During the pandemic, eThekwini dealt proactively with the homeless, providing appropriate shelter and support facilities and services. Homelessness is not part of local government’s mandate, but officials felt that “under the circumstances […] we find ourselves with little choice but to actually embrace the homeless in view of the pandemic”.

The municipality found itself in a contradictory position. On the one hand, as the sphere of government closest to the people, it needed to – and was willing to – respond to local needs on the ground. On the other hand, providing the homeless with a range of social services was clearly not part of its legal mandate. This meant that, for example, purchasing emergency tents for the homeless would be considered an irregular expenditure and have audit consequences that the municipality would have to deal with later. Moreover, COVID-19-related financial demands, including unfunded mandates, put a major strain on financial resources. Given the impact of COVID on the economy, the major concern was the looming revenue collection crisis. The reality of not having sufficient cash on hand by the end of the 2019/2020 financial year to honour creditors and other major expenses was seen as a very real threat to financial sustainability.

In summary, two issues emerged: Unfunded mandates and municipal audit procedures were not compatible with disaster response protocols; and fiscal structure and how national government expects metros to be self-sustaining, despite their large populations burdened with health and other challenges.

4. The Power of Building Stakeholder Partnerships: Homeless Response Case Study

The eThekwini Municipality’s response to the challenge of the homeless during the pandemic, which triggered the issue of unfunded mandates, provides invaluable lessons about how stakeholders can come together around a common crisis. While there may be some ambivalence and uncertainty about certain aspects of eThekwini’s response to the pandemic, the highlight is undoubtedly the way in which the municipality managed the plight of Durban’s homeless, which some interviewees consider an international good governance practice.
Summary of the case study

The pandemic was a catalyst for building highly effective stakeholder relationships between the municipality and civil society organisations. An example is the integrated COVID-19 response to homelessness in eThekwini.

The Deputy-Mayor provided the political leadership to activate the existing mechanism of the Task Team on Homelessness, which brought together city officials, NGOs and universities, to coordinate an integrated response to the needs of the homeless during the lockdown.

Thirteen safe spaces were identified in the city, and the different stakeholders mobilised resources to equip the sites with ablution facilities, basic shelter, hygiene packs and food. The response from the municipal departments was extraordinary during this time of crisis: “All departments of the city have come together in a very coordinated fashion to allow this to be a successful programme.”

The response from all stakeholders was so effective that an unexpected consequence was a significant improvement in the health and well-being of the homeless at the designated sites.

Since lockdown, I would say that the health of homeless people has improved a hundred times. We’ve had mobile clinics going to visit homeless people both from TB/HIV Care and also from the Dennis Hurley Centre checking essentially that people are screened and tested for TB and HIV. And to see that they if they’re not on medication, that they are then put onto medication … and we found probably a couple of hundred people who had undetected either TB or HIV who are now on medication for those two chronic illnesses, which I think is an amazing outcome.

The sites offered wound care and referrals to local hospitals and even psychiatric services, which were voluntarily offered by one of Durban’s leading psychiatrists. From a local government point of view, the more progressive aspect was recognising the need to deal with the lived reality of those homeless people who would be cut off from their supply of drugs due to the lockdown regulations. Therefore, the sites also offered an innovative and well-coordinated medical intervention to manage the trauma associated with the withdrawal from active drug use. As many as 230 beneficiaries received proper dosages of methadone, which is an opioid substitute that assists in ameliorating the effects of withdrawal.

The value of political leadership

Political leadership can drive the process, give strategic direction, be available to provide support and guidance, and effectively become the face of the coordinated effort. This last point cannot be overstated, as senior municipal officials could not be a substitute for political leadership. During the pandemic, what was needed were “people who actually all have the political profile to be pretty outstanding when it comes to harnessing the resources, capacities and skills that are required”.

Effective political leadership secured political capital and helped to unlock and mobilise other forms of capital:

- Financial capital: As the head of Exco, the mayor was able to mobilise funding that even senior managers or other ward or PR Councillors would not have been able to do.
- Symbolic capital: The political leadership was visible and active at the sites with the frontline actors, which had a major impact on other stakeholders and helped inspire confidence and credibility in the partnership. Through asserting the rights of the homeless, the mayor and deputy-mayor made an important statement not only to homeless people but to others in the city.
- Social capital: Effective leadership was able to activate networks, which themselves unlocked more, much-needed resources.

The municipality as an enabler

The municipality is only one player that needs to work in concert with others, and its role is to provide an enabling environment, so each stakeholder can mobilise their respective resources. Playing this enabling role is not easy and requires municipal officials with the right attributes. As one non-municipal contributor commented, “I think that it takes intelligence and humility from city officials in recognising that on their own they would never have been able to do this”.

The horizontal cooperation between local government and its civil society partners showed that genuine stakeholder partnerships could yield developmental outcomes. For municipal officials, the coordinated and integrated homeless response to the pandemic, achieved only through working in partnership, had a major impact.
Referring to eThekwini’s homeless response, a senior manager was visibly moved and described the partnership as “remarkable” in its ability to respond so effectively and timeously, as demonstrated by the screening of 2000 homeless people in the first weekend of lockdown alone:

COVID-19 has been a big eye opener in terms of the need for us to enhance the partnerships between ourselves as government, different spheres but also enhance partnerships within business and from society and including labour.

This senior manager shared that for two years prior to COVID, the NGO and academic sector had been taking the lead in championing this cause. It took the pandemic and the resulting government legislation to re-energise and mobilise renewed support from the municipality.

I don’t think eThekwini as a municipality would have succeeded in handling the issue around homelessness in the context of lockdown if it were not for the Homeless Task Team, and without having the calibre of NGOs and committed people.

These insights resonated with reflections from contributors outside the municipality. For one NGO partner, part of the success was that the Task Team on Homelessness had been in place before the pandemic, “so, because we already knew each other already, worked with each other, it was much easier for us to work together to respond to the pandemic”.

There was a recognition that each stakeholder needed each other, since they had each brought valuable contributions to the table, as an NGO contributor explains:

The NGOs had expertise and had nimbleness but didn’t necessarily have the resources. The municipality had the resources but didn’t always have the right expertise. The corporates could access expert resources but needed to work with us too, to deliver something. So, we worked together well in designing the plan and implementing the plan and then, importantly, having the courage to keep looking at the plan and changing it as there were new developments.

This non-state perspective reinforces the point that each stakeholder brings a particular strength to the partnership. The municipality’s role is to provide leadership and create an environment that allows each of the partners to be able to take action. Yet this basic tenet of facilitating stakeholder engagement is sometimes not embedded in the municipal psyche, which continues to view the local state as a “provider”, not an “enabler”.

Common recognition of need for urgent and focused action
The municipality and its civil society partners demonstrated a unique ability to respond effectively and timeously during the crisis. In attempting to make sense of this, one contributor explained that they were all:

in an emergency situation and we cannot wait. We cannot wait for power struggles. We cannot wait for context between political parties. We cannot wait for NGOs to feel that they are not marginalised in the process.

This astute observation speaks to the usual distractions and powerplays that often delay integrated action and acknowledges powerfully that stakeholders recognised the need for urgent and focused action. It demonstrates that civil society actors can coalesce and work together to achieve a common objective in the South African context of unemployment, poverty and inequality that will be exacerbated by the socioeconomic effects of the pandemic.

The importance of engaging with stakeholders as genuinely equal partners
Bringing together stakeholders in a forum as equals to continually monitor and solve problems, led by the Office of the Mayor, was a simple but powerful governance mechanism:

Every single morning there’s a events operational meeting which takes place at the Moses Mabhida Stadium and all the site managers are part of that. The heads of the medical teams are part of that. The head of the feeding scheme is part of it. Relevant city officials from social developments and certain cities all sit together every single morning with the police officers that are in charge. The supervising police officers too. They all talk about the day before, what has happened, any problems that have emerged and to plan the day coming up. I think those meetings have been really, really instrumental in ensuring that this is a smooth-running operation.

The importance of a clear delineation of lines of accountability
While contributors lauded the spirit of working together as equal partners, lines of accountability were not clearly delineated, and the lines of responsibility were blurred from time to time. As the NGO partner explained, “so, we ended up in a situation where we had non-municipal people working with municipal people […] without it being clear who was accountable to whom and how they were accountable.”
A senior municipal official also raised the point about accountability in multi-stakeholder programmes: “We have to ensure transparency on the programs that are being implemented, the accountability, who’s accountable, who’s responsible for what efficiency on them.”

At times, not knowing the lines of ultimate accountability led to confusion. While everyone appreciated the spirit of working together and valued the unique contributors of the various roleplayers, a challenge was not knowing where exactly the final accountability lay.

5. Towards More Citizen-led Community Responses

While this integrated and coordinated response and commitment to genuine partnership were lauded as an international good practice, an interesting alternate view emerged during one of the municipal interviews: that the effort remined nonetheless very much led by government. NGOs had entered into partnership with government, but the voice and energies of communities and their structures were not as visible during the response to the pandemic. This critique is useful and speaks to the extent to which citizens and their organised structures are able to directly influence outcomes.

In terms of the often-quoted Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation (Figure 5), the response is ranked fairly high, but falls short of being a citizen-controlled process. Yet facilitating and mobilising maximum citizen control of the process would not have been easy given the nature of the crisis and the regulations governing the lockdown. At the same time, the opportunity to create more space for direct civic engagement should be noted.

![Figure 5: A ladder of citizen participation](image)

Source: Arnstein (1969)

In wrapping up this part of the story that was framed under the cooperative governance theme, the eThekwini governance narrative is clearly complex. The value of having an in-depth understanding of tricky intergovernmental processes helps paint a balanced and nuanced picture. These provocations and reflections continue as the story continues framed under the theme “building a capable state” that emerged organically.
The Capable and Developmental State Theme

The eThekwini story pointed to some serious capability deficits that required urgent and concerted effort. This is not a unique story and resonates strongly with many other metropolitan areas in South Africa. It also echoes the central thrusts contained in Chapter 13 of the National Development Plan (NPC, 2011), which acknowledges the temptation of quick fixes that divert attention from more fundamental governance priorities, as well as the deficit in skills and professionalism that affects all elements of the public service.6

The National Development Plan (NDP) offers a clear policy framework with a well-formulated vision on what a capable and developmental post-apartheid state should look like, and provides a useful backdrop to contextualise this narrative. Reflections from state and non-state contributors in eThekwini spoke largely to the capability concerns outlined in the NDP. These frank and honest reflections on the current capabilities of the municipality assist in gauging the current state of play and help inform future policy directions contained in the recommendations section of this report.

The varied responses from contributors to the capable and developmental state theme again painted a complex picture. While, the general consensus was that the crisis surfaced many heroic responses from committed and highly capable officials (as highlighted in the homeless case study), these were not necessarily indicative of the general workforce. In essence, much work still needs to be done to develop a state that is able to respond in dynamic and development ways, especially given the complex challenges that cities will face during the post-COVID economic reconstruction period.

A senior manager observed that, over the years, a complacency has slowly crept into the State. It took an international pandemic to reveal some of the critical fault lines in basic service delivery. For example, as shown in the scramble to provide emergency water and sanitation relief and to respond quickly to other social development needs: “We’ve been in crisis for so long. This was kind of made acute, but why are we responding so much now because there’s a crisis?”

The pandemic revealed many of the structural inadequacies within the municipal system in terms of even basic service delivery. Free of the busyness of daily office distractions, contributors were able to reflect on some of the systemic challenges facing the municipality that prevented the realisation of a capable and developmental local state.

For many contributors, the pandemic provided a unique opportunity for critical introspection and self-reflection. The “new normal” needed to be interrogated and would require a new long-term strategy to be crafted, to guide a new trajectory and to inform new enabling policy frameworks and plans. However, central to realising the new vision was the need for a new breed of civil servant who would not only possess the requisite skills, competence and attitude to work with others, but also be an embodiment of the core values and ethics of the new developmental state. However, capable staff is only one piece of the governance puzzle; an enabling municipal system, which supports creativity, innovation and rewards excellence, is also key. This would require an organisation overhaul that cannot be attempted without full support from the leadership team.

The final piece in the capable state story, which was not anticipated, was about the need to place greater value on data in decision-making and digital governance, while recognising the digital divide in a highly unequal society.

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6 Note that the NDP provides a set of key recommendations from strengthening local government, including the prioritisation of citizen participation; improving inter-departmental coordination; building a skilled and professional public service with local government as a career of choice, right down to recognising the need to stabilise the political-administrative interface so that the officials are insulated from political interference.
6. A Time for Serious Introspection and New Post-COVID Strategy, Policy and Plan

Like most large bureaucracies, the municipality has a tendency to forget and to be hardwired to go back to the ‘usual’ way of working. All contributors agreed that the pandemic offered an opportunity for municipal self-reflection and policy revision. A concern was that the general response to the pandemic was more reactive rather than proactive, and that people should not revert to short-term thinking because the pandemic would not disappear within a couple of months. Municipalities need to think about changing everyday practice and embedding the ‘new normal’, in order to prepare for other crises (health, environmental, resource or unrest) that will require them to respond differently on a much more continuous basis. COVID-19 had presented a unique opportunity to create bold new strategy, policy and operating procedures, which not only respond to the crisis but also anticipate forward planning for the municipality to respond proactively in various areas.

City strategy

The city treasurer emphasised the urgent need for a total and fundamental re-examination of the city strategy including the long-term financial plans. The pandemic necessitated the reworking of the long-term plan and the IDP, and the re-examining of projects that should be implemented within the next five years to align with the economic recovery plan. There was a renewed imperative for all spheres of government to work collectively to prioritise the rejuvenation of the economy post-COVID, in order to reduce unemployment, in a context of a weakened rand and sectors that had been most affected, such as tourism.

The new strategy required thinking about the implications of people becoming comfortable with a new way of doing things and not reverting to the old ways of (for example) working and shopping. New work and consumer patterns would affect the tax and city rates base. Similarly, in a post-COVID long-term strategy, plans and operations would need to be flexible, to adapt to the spatial socioeconomic changes in eThekwini. Homes are now equally work and living spaces, and the Durban beachfront (for example) is for both entertainment and work. Therefore, a whole new set of assumptions must drive new planning scenarios as part of a forward-looking city strategy.

According to contributors within the City Strategy Office, one of the offshoots from the Multi-Disciplinary Task Team managing the pandemic was the encouraging trend of thinking beyond COVID. This team is applying itself to future planning and development decisions, the use of technology and how to expedite making Durban a smart city. Therefore, the crisis has already created a unique opportunity for transversality, by assembling officials from different disciplines to think creatively about long-term strategy. As a result of this collaboration, the next IDP will include a separate chapter about the COVID response and how the city will be rolling out new programmes post-COVID that will incorporate sustainability and resilience.
Human settlements policy
The coordinated response to the homeless has been lauded and identified as a good practice, but also revealed some inherent municipal policy inadequacies that would not have happened without the pandemic. For example, one contributor suggested that the policy spotlight could focus on deeper questions around who belongs in the city and how responsive policy-makers are to the way in which families are defined. A good case in point was that planning for shelters was excluded from the human settlements response. Some incorrect assumptions underlying the municipality's housing policy were revealed, such as homeless people are accommodated in informal settlements or backyard shacks, and everyone aspires to an RDP house.

Informal economy policy
Without downplaying the effect of the lockdown on the formal economy, both officials and the NGO sector highlighted the need to focus on the impact of COVID-19 on informal workers. Both political and administrative leadership would need to work jointly together to reaffirm their commitment to the informal economy.

A somewhat controversial but important observation made was that the pandemic revealed very conflicting messaging by the eThekwini Municipality of its commitment to being a caring city. More specifically, some argued that the COVID response revealed a politically ambivalent response to urban poverty. The intentions may be there, but a clearer and bolder political announcement and follow-through action were needed. Post-COVID, the city's political leadership needs to acknowledge unequivocally informality, as a critical pathway for people to grow the inner-city economy, which would help direct officials' technical responses. According to the NGO contributor, this new approach would usher in a new culture where state and non-state actors would be more sympathetic to the plight of the homeless, and people living in sub-adequate shelter or working in the informal economy.

More specifically, the story called for a much greater commitment to facilitate the occupation of public space that them would progress towards a "deeper kind of participation in the inner-city economy". The NGO contributor highlighted that local government has not fully embraced the achievements of informal workers. Yet, rewarding individuals in public spaces in the inner-city informal economy would make a very real contribution to relieving the economic burden on the municipality. This, like the revelation around the shortcomings in housing policy, is an important provocation that only surfaced because of the pandemic.

Disaster management and planning
While the State responded as best as it could, it needs to be far more proactive and have a plan for major crises. Interestingly, none of the interviewees referred to the existing Disaster Management Plan, which may suggest that it was not used to guide action.

I think one big lesson is having a single, big, shared plan that is put together very quickly. I think we didn't have that. We've been on a bit of a pay-as-you-go mode of working, you know, an issue comes, you respond to it.

Crisis planning and management lacked a single shared plan that all could follow. Having solid political leadership played a crucial role, but more could have been done if a plan had been in place.

7. An Accompanying Organisational Overhaul
The crafting of a new strategy and policy framework would need to be accompanied by addressing the systemic and structural organisational deficit that required urgent attention:

So, I know as a manager [...] you got to push against the system constantly to protect those employees that are motivated and want to produce. And then for those that don't want to do anything, it's really a very onerous process to be able to get them to do work.

This suggests an inability of management to inspire confidence in staff to become productive and structural HR constraints that need to be examined as part of an integrated productivity strategy. Another contributor argued that changing and adapting municipal culture and systems are not easy, as municipalities are by their nature generally very traditional institutions: “I was just thinking what if the mayor had one single shared plan that has got a clear set of responsibilities, targets around which everyone must report on.”

What these reflections show is that, unfortunately, many eThekwini officials may not have fully internalised the notion of developmental local government, and their focus is more on the regulatory aspects. Claims were made that such officials are merely performing their duties with delegated authority and have very little margin to exercise their own discretion, which stifles any room for innovation and creativity. Conversely, some officials may be subjected to interference from politicians and be under pressure to make decisions that are not necessarily sound technical responses. This issue of political interference was raised earlier and has to be
flagged as a key concern and obstacle to building a developmental state: “They lack the agility to respond more urgently to issues unless they are pushed to a corner. The pandemic has pushed us into this corner to become more agile in terms of decision-making.”

8. Wanted: A New Breed of Municipal Official

The eThekwini response to the homeless during the pandemic appeared to challenge the dominant narrative, that a typical South African municipality lacks the necessary skills, capacity and work ethic to respond effectively. As one non-municipal contributor reflected:

> [S]ome city officials have come on board more than others, but mostly even city officials that I’ve experienced as having been fairly inactive in the past have really, really shown themselves to be very much more capable than I ever imagined they would be, which has been impressive.

A senior politician from within the municipality reinforced the view that eThekwini does not necessarily lack skills and competence: “There are excellent officials in eThekwini, there are competent officials in eThekwini, I know who they are. I know I get an instant reaction when something major happens.”

These observations suggest that, unlike many other municipalities in South Africa that are grappling with the challenge of capability and capacity to deliver, eThekwini appears to have a core of competence that is recognised for innovation and excellence. The Metro Police’s human-rights approach to the homeless was raised as being instrumental in the overall successful management of the sites. This department played a key role through the efforts of its officials and demonstrated that including departments from the onset can bring unexpected results:

> [W]hen you involve police officers from the point of planning to the point of execution, you have a very different response from when you simply expect police to do something that they are not involved in the design of.

However, while these positive reflections from some municipal and non-municipal contributors are encouraging, they do not necessarily convey the entire picture. There was certainly a sense from some other senior managers that not all leaders (even the senior management team comprising Unit Heads) were able to effectively lead their teams from the front.

A senior municipal official commented that during lockdown level 5, many executives were not using online platforms or even using the time to plan and strategise to help re-position the city. Not all managers displayed the commitment, dedication, passion, and leadership that the situation required.

> [S]ome people chose this as an opportunity to go to their alternative residence, which I found absolutely shocking and disgusting […] and it just reflects very poorly on those individuals. I really thought that this was a time where people would give the best to the city and understanding the circumstances that we find ourselves in uniting against COVID.

An NGO contributor also pointed out that not all officials had embraced the notion of being a civil servant who is committed to serve the public interest: “We seem to have lost a patience and a willingness to take on the real meaning of being an official, which is being a civil servant first. You mean to be civil and certainly meant to be a servant.”

Anecdotal evidence from the reflections showed that some frontline officials in eThekwini seemed to reveal “the hard side of the city” when interacting with informal workers. An example that exposed the failings of the bureaucracy is that of workers who travelled long distances into town to access temporary licences to trade during the lockdown, but were then denied access to the council building as they did not have a permit to leave their homes. Another example of hardened municipal attitudes at a time of extreme economic hardship for the marginalised and vulnerable is that of a police officer who tore up a temporary permit, deeming it to be a fraud, despite the informal worker’s insistence on its authenticity. These differing viewpoints once again help portray a more nuanced and textured view of the complex realities of governance that emerge from the eThekwini story.

Although employee skill and competence were important issues in building a capable state, and indeed eThekwini may have had pockets of excellent and innovative staff, more work is urgently needed to build a truly motivated and inspired workforce across the organisation. Therefore, skills and capability appeared to be an issue at some levels, but more pertinent was staff morale and raising the emotional intelligence of officials: “You know, I think skills and capability is a part of it, but it’s also a different emotional intelligence. See, which is even more important in some instances than skill.”

Another view was that many frontline officials did not always apply themselves fully to achieving the required outcomes. Rather, the focus was activity-based and on completing tasks, without considering whether such
tasks would lead to developmental outcomes. An example given was that of the City Health official who was scanning and recording the temperatures of all people entering the building. The temperatures of the interviewee and his colleague were recorded at 25 and 45 degrees, which was clearly an incorrect reading. However, when they queried this reading, the official’s response was that his task was to record the readings, not comment on them.

In attempting to unpack the underlying reasons for the quality of some officials, constant reference was made to the pervasive influence of politics in the appointments of municipal staff. The NDP flags this issue as one of the crucial factors that can prevent the realisation of capable developmental state. As will be explored later, this practice needs to be raised in governance conversations, as it appears to be a pervasive challenge across South African municipalities.

9. A Renewed Focus on e-Governance

The research team was surprised by the clarion call that emerged for more effective digital governance across the municipality, as part of a broader e-governance strategy. A start had been made, with all senior staff having access to Microsoft (MS) Teams, which became an invaluable communication tool during lockdown (although not many of the staff had used it prior to the pandemic). In addition, having a political leadership (such as the Mayor) that was technologically aware and used MS Teams helped enable the interface between officials and politicians. In effect, the pandemic sped up the move towards digital governance through managing systems online, as physical contact had to be reduced significantly. However, insufficient effort has been made to facilitate more municipal services to be online. For example, the submission of plans is not yet electronic and e-procurement is not fully operational. This shortcoming was revealed during the pandemic and needs to be addressed if e-governance is to be embedded in the municipality.

Need to bridge the digital divide

Concerns were raised about the real digital divide in the city, given the disparate inequalities as a result of apartheid’s legacy. Many citizens experience daily the effects of this divide, as they are unable to access even basic technology. This showed up in the highly differentiated access to schooling during the lockdown. Although education is not a local government competency, municipalities can create an enabling digital environment for citizens that can assist in the teaching and learning process. Indeed, the pandemic revealed the gaping digital divide between the rich and poor: “COVID-19 has exposed us on the ill-preparedness in terms of the imperative of the fourth industrial revolution.”

Most private and former model C schools were able to continue online-teaching, but many poorer township schools were dependent solely on contact teaching, as most educators lacked the online systems and tools and the learners did not have access to data or basic electronic devices. Ten years ago, eThekwini had started laying fibre to improve cheap public connectivity, but the project was aborted and contributed to exacerbating the digital inequality in the city.

10. Towards Data-driven Decision-making

The last element in the story related to building a capable state is a municipality’s ability to think and plan ahead. This requires the municipality to collect and manage data effectively so that it can be used intelligently to inform decision-making.

Contributors had some strong views about the importance of data, analysis and information for making decisions, especially in times of crises. However, the municipality lacks the ability to collect data and the experts to analyse the data to inform meaningful decisions. Not enough progress had been made on this issue. For instance, 20 years after the start of local democracy, a proper indigent database was still not available at a household level in eThekwini. This could have been an invaluable resource for councillors and enabled them to provide more effective socioeconomic relief to their constituencies, facilitating even basic responses to provide food parcels during the pandemic. The Chief Strategy Office also acknowledged that a major challenge during the pandemic was inadequate localised data collection. This became apparent during the tracing process to identify pandemic hotspots. A cornerstone of a capable state is having officials who are able to use data to help political leadership make decisions that do not raise unrealistic expectations. Challenges include municipal data systems that are not fully integrated and (more worrisome) some municipal officials who are still keen on preserving silos. There was a call for real-time data that could inform better and faster decision-making.
Testing and Refining the Governance Story

This governance story of eThekwini was co-created by both municipal and non-municipal contributors who were directly involved in the COVID-19 response, supported by the research team. The narrative and accompanying audio-graphic “voices from the frontline” containing excerpts of contributor’s reflections were tested in two workshops: one with an inter-departmental committee, which comprised senior municipal officials tasked with transforming the municipal institution and was chaired by the chief operating officer; and one with external stakeholders. This section shares some of the reflections that emerged from these two workshops.

eThekwini Municipal Reflections

The narrative was generally very well received, and participants agreed in principle with its central thrust and direction. Comments from the Committee Chairperson set the tone for engagement:

My view is that what has been presented resonates with our experiences, and with my experience in particular. Having also been in local government for nearly two decades myself […] what has been presented really is a true reflection.

Participants suggested seven points of emphasis.

Greater recognition of the general positive response

Although critical reflection is necessary, the pandemic was unexpected, which did not come through enough in the story. Despite extraordinary circumstances, the municipality managed to rally staff to respond in ways that achieved positive results. This sense of resilience and triumph needed to be recognised more:

We are still standing! In terms of the country and how we had responded […] even the world has acknowledged our response. Everyone put themselves out there in a time of crisis, despite their own personal fears and uncertainty.

Greater appreciation of complexity of intergovernmental relations.

Participants felt that the story should emphasise more the textured account of cooperative governance. For example, national government’s response may be perceived as top-down, but this was not a homogenous response and differed greatly across national government departments. Special mention must go to the proactive role played by National Treasury and the CSP, which made an extra effort to work in partnership with the municipality – this model was a good practice and should be acknowledged more in the story.

At the same time, eThekwini officials accepted the need for introspection in order to understand why national governments actions may be perceived as top-down. These perceptions may have arisen because of national government’s frustration over not receiving timeously information from eThekwini officials. Therefore, in essence, a more measured response was called for – this model was a good practice and should be acknowledged more in the story.

Another point made was about the failure to bring much-needed resources to the ground level, emphasising that communities on the ground may not have experienced the results of having a Task Team coordinating the response. Adequate intergovernmental structures may have been established, but the story needed to appreciate the reality that these did not necessarily translate into achieving positive outcomes due to internal bureaucratic constraints:

[A]ctually, food parcels and PPE were delayed in getting to communities on time, because we as government did not have staff members to do that. I think we were still stuck within our job descriptions and within our work … so that we couldn’t go beyond that and provide assistance where we can.

Greater emphasis on moving beyond core skills to building new ethical, value-based municipal official

There was a unanimous agreement on the urgent need to build a new cadre of municipal official. However, the story should re-emphasise the need to go beyond skills training towards developing executives who are human-centred, empathetic, progressive, flexible and ultimately value-based:

This is the nemesis of the 21st century […] poor or severed relationships amongst executives […] has led to the delay in the implementation of multi-billion rand projects and really robbed the poor of service delivery.

A more differentiated citizen-led response.

The need to engage eThekwini citizens more actively resonated well in the feedback session. However, at the same time a far more differentiated response is needed when thinking about citizens. Residents have very
different needs to businesses, which has implications in terms of the services that are offered. A suggestion made was that the engagement plan could be categorised to appreciate these differing needs, so that unique responses could be tailor-made.

Political leadership held accountable for deviating from long-term priorities
One of the gaps in the story was that it did not emphasise the longer-term trajectory and how changing terms of political leadership were not held accountable to staying true to the long-term vision. This is not a challenge specific to eThekwini, as many cities globally are confronted with the dilemma of holding the short-term political office-bearers accountable for longer-term strategic development priorities that will be realised only many terms later. As a result, political leaders have been tempted to focus on short-termism, foregoing the longer-term mandates agreed to with strategic partners. All concurred that this trading of long-term imperatives for short-term political gains was a very serious matter that required intervention at a much higher level. A call was made for the SACN to intervene, to flag this matter and think about strategic political decisions at a national level to ensure that cities are able to achieve their longer-term objectives.

In response to this suggestion, another contributor noted that the eThekwini story needed to be shared with the entire political leadership team. It was felt that while testing the story and engaging with senior management was greatly appreciated, it was crucial "not to leave the political leadership behind!”. Critical reflection required on DDM
There was also agreement on the need to proceed cautiously in implementing the DDM. If the implementation were rushed and not fully embedded into the organisation, the DDM could become another tick-box exercise, like “Project Consolidate” or “Back to Basics” that were not necessarily sustainable, as they were not properly institutionalised. These are important reflections that must be considered before the DDM operational roll-out.

A strategy beyond COVID-19 towards 4IR
A final important contribution was to resist the temptation to craft a strategy around a pandemic that is timebound. Instead, COVID-19 should be used to transition to the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) as the new normal is being embraced. The 4IR would be a better driver for redirecting municipal strategy than a pandemic. The next round of IDPs in 2021 could present an opportunity to embed the 4IR as a more fundamental driver of institutional change. However, leveraging the short-term strategy does not mean that digitalisation will be sufficient to address the other issues raised around developmental values, intergovernmental relations, emotional intelligence, etc.

Recommendations
The co-created eThekwini narrative provided rich insights into the state of local governance. While the story is important, illuminating key reflections, it is necessary to go beyond analysis and understanding. This section distils a set of strategic actions that were mined from the contributors’ responses and combined with personal insights from the research team. It is by no means comprehensive but is a useful starting point for governance interventions in eThekwini and in other South African metros facing similar challenges. These recommendations were presented to the municipality, for the Institutional Reform Committee to consider as part of their strategic planning process.

Cooperative Governance Interventions

The challenges of intergovernmental relations
Instead of lamenting challenges around intergovernmental relations and joined-up government, what is needed is to reflect critically on the lessons learned and to use the renewed energy around COVID to maintain the new momentum among stakeholders.

Now we can take some of those lessons and escalate it and mainstream it into how are we actually going to work as local government and as governance, in a bigger context between spheres and with citizens and non-government organisations, etc.

Three recommendations are made in relation to intergovernmental relations.

#1 A lobbying call for legislative review to promote more autonomy
A major lesson was that cities need greater autonomy to respond to local challenges:
Local government […] are government closest to the people […] should be given authorities and powers to start and initiate the programme before we have a situation where we await the pronouncement by the minister, the MEC or Premier for that matter.

A plea was made for the SACN to support the call to lobby national government on empowering local governments much more. For example, given the time lost waiting for COGTA to pronounce on how to move forward with the municipal budgeting process, the suggestion was made that COGTA should consider legislative changes that would allow municipalities greater flexibility to determine how best to respond during times of crisis. Also needed was a greater devolution of power and the relaxation of certain regulatory aspects, including the ability to fast-track procurement processes.

A call was made for greater flexibility around the conditions for spending grants. Municipalities would be able to be responsive to local needs and be empowered to manage their own affairs if they had greater flexibility to spend the entire pot of available grants (Urban Settlement Development Grant, Public Transport Infrastructure and Systems Grant, Human Settlements Development Grant).

In keeping with this theme of greater autonomy and flexibility, another call was to allow a further adjustment budget to accommodate COVID-related expenditure. Creating this window of adjustment would allow for the uncertainty that was dealt with during these times.

Given the lessons learned around the inflexibility of legislation, due consideration should be given to amending legislation that will empower councils or Excos to meet (at least virtually) and lead decision-making, rather than delegate it to the City Manager.

#2 Institute the City Budget Forum as a permanent mechanism
Beyond these important legislative considerations to enable greater autonomy, an important institutional suggestion was made that is simple to implement. The City Budget Forum was seen as a critically important mechanism that could be a powerful platform for understanding local government’s financial challenges beyond the COVID pandemic. The call was made to strengthen this creative mechanism and sustain its function to promote long-term intergovernmental relations.

#3 Reflect critically on the lessons learned during COVID-19 as the DDM is being piloted
With eThekwini selected as a pilot, before proceeding with the DDM roll-out, critical reflection is needed on the intergovernmental challenges experienced during the pandemic. A concern raised was about the “underlying intergovernmental conflicts that stem from awkward distribution of powers and functions pertaining to the built environment”, which could lead to conflict and planning mismatches (Pieterse, 2020: 20). Therefore, before implementing the DDM, it may be important to think through these relationships and how they could be streamlined.

Unfunded mandates: a time for a crucial conversation!
Over the past two decades, unfunded mandates have been an emotive and controversial issue for municipalities. At the heart of the challenge is the reality that local government is closest to the citizenry. Residents are unable to decipher which sphere has the powers to start and initiate the programme and so an important conversation is needed with all spheres about how to deal with this contested area, especially in times of crisis. An urgent resolution is needed, and “it requires collective leadership; it requires political will and it requires great acumen from city administrators together with support from National Treasury”.

The importance of sustaining deep and meaningful stakeholder engagements

#1 Re-think conventional notions of stakeholder engagement
The municipality’s strategic processes include a set of standard practices for stakeholder engagements. As part of the IDP or budget process, the municipality convenes meetings to consult with stakeholders. These meetings are legislatively prescribed but are sometimes implemented as compliance measures. Municipal contributors committed to re-think these standard forms of engagement, as how stakeholder engagement is understood and measured needs to be completely redefined: “We should not be measured by the number of participation meetings held, but by the number of co-governance programmes managed”.

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This progressive development was inspired by the renewed energy displayed by the Task Team on Homelessness and could perhaps mark a return to the municipality’s initial commitment to genuine engagement with stakeholders of the early 2000s.

**#2 Devis e a set of clear roles and responsibilities for stakeholders**

To address the unclear lines of accountability identified by both state and non-state players, the rules of engagement that guide relationships between civil society and government need to be defined. Appropriate and clear lines of accountability within multi-stakeholder partnerships need to be delineated. The careful crafting of a Terms of Reference will help eliminate confusion and promote more effective stakeholder governance. Furthermore, beyond the mere outlining of roles and responsibilities, the idea of stating consequences of the actions of all stakeholders would also promote accountability.

**#3 Re-examine constraints and bottlenecks that prevent timeous development responses**

The eThekwini case study showed how in emergency situations, the State (local, provincial and national) was able to mobilise resources more quickly than it claims to be able to do. The lesson here is how to mobilise such resources in non-emergency situations:

> It shouldn’t only be in emergency situations that we should be able to say, okay, this is needed now for a particular reason and I cannot wait. We have now learned that it is possible to get things going at very short notice.

It is suggested that the Executive Management Team convene a Project Retro exercise to understand how a speedier response during the crisis was possible. The lessons learned here must be adopted across the municipality, so that other multi-stakeholder teams tackling a range of socioeconomic challenges could benefit from more expeditious government action.

**#4 Recognise the value of appointing programme champions**

The case study demonstrated the value of having powerful champions in the city to deal with social issues such as homelessness, security, poverty, etc. The critical role of appointing a dedicated champion to pursue the best interests of the respective programme needs to be acknowledged. More importantly, the champion must be prepared to work with the available state and non-state resources, capacities and skills; and be able to recognise the strengths of the various stakeholders and allow for shared decision-making and assessments, rather than running programmes unilaterally simply because these are mandates of government. This recommendation may appear simple, but the power of acknowledgement can have a major impact.

**Towards more citizen-led community responses**

Although stakeholder engagement was considered a high point in the eThekwini case study, the ultimate governance ideal would be to have empowered communities that hold leadership accountable for providing decisive, clear and timeously communicated information. This was not always the case, and citizens (in particular vulnerable communities) were marginalised, especially around how they received and responded to information.

The suggestion by a municipal contributor that the pandemic response did not allow sufficient space for a more citizen-led community response begins to raise the governance bar. There needs to be a conscious move away from government-led to more citizen-led responses to crises. A revised disaster management response needs to pay more attention to vulnerable groups and how they access information.

An NGO respondent made a similar point and noted that mobilising communities to effect behaviour change was a key lesson learned from COVID-19. In the South African cultural context, social distancing was not easy and required major educational awareness and buy-in of communities. Changing behaviour through awareness and buy-in is also needed in order to deal with challenges such as climate change. Therefore, the municipality should consider developing more capacity to be able to change mindsets and behaviours at the community level. Ultimately, the ‘new normal’ governance mindset must shift from the current zero tolerance to one that meaningfully brings people on board, where they themselves start to commit to maximum compliance. This may be a long-term objective but is a far more sustainable approach.

**Capable and Developmental State Interventions**

The pandemic also provided a useful platform for critical thought and reflections on “building a capable and developmental state”. Most contributors agreed that much still needs to be done to achieve this end goal.

**A time for self-reflection and serious policy rethinking**

**#1 Commence work on an inclusive, bold post-COVID city strategy**
Senior managers intend rethinking their city strategy. The boldness of the strategy will lie in its ability to re-benchmark the city in terms of where it envisions itself to be, with more realistic expectation given the massive economic downturn. It will recognise the reality that most of eThekwini’s citizens will be attempting to eke out basic livelihoods, and that government will need to provide an enabling environment for them to survive. The new strategy needs to build on the proactive work already done on the comprehensive economic recovery plan, which was supported by political leadership and key city stakeholders. It is worth noting that after eThekwini shared its plan at a national online city forum, other cities were inspired to begin work on preparing their own economic recovery plans.

A key pillar of the recovery plan should be supporting the township and the informal economy, acknowledging the importance of the informal economy for livelihoods. Several strategies have already been put in place to help rebuild this fragile economy, including a six-month rent waiver on informal trading stalls and a zero increase in rentals over the next financial year. Other aspects of the economy recovery plan involve supporting tourism and industrialisation; accelerating radical socioeconomic transformation; speeding up construction, infrastructure and investment projects; and operationalising a socioeconomic fund that is being championed by the Mayor.

A solid platform has been built, which is very encouraging, but the strategy team needs to resist the temptation to write up a post-COVID strategic plan and then consult with stakeholders, as per legislative prescriptions. Given the immense civil society energy during COVID, the municipality would be wise to use this opportunity to truly co-create a bold new strategy with all roleplayers. A precedent was set with the development of the municipality’s LTDF and Imagine Durban plans that mobilised the energies of both organised civil society and ordinary residents. The capacity to action this process exists within the municipality and needs to be activated, while the political leadership needs to lead and drive this strategy process.

**#2 Begin a comprehensive policy review process**

With a draft city strategy in place, a comprehensive review is needed of existing policies, which may counter the new thrust of the strategy. A revised human settlements policy is urgently needed that re-examines some of the basic assumptions and incorporates the suggestions made, such as including the provision of homeless shelters. In developing a forward-looking informal trade policy framework, the way in which the informal economy is understood and prioritised needs rethinking. Creative thinking is needed around defining informal workers and supporting them through, for example, infrastructure, training and finance. Another suggestion made was for urban planners and designers to redesign public space. The restrictive and outdated regulatory frameworks and regulations need to be investigated urgently, with a view of relaxing these in the medium term, whilst crafting newer, more appropriate post-COVID arrangements.

Again, the broad policy redesign process should be a participative and inclusive one. A concrete recommendation is for eThekwini’s Municipal Institute of Learning (MILE) to lead this process through seminar-based sessions that bring key built environment players into a structured policy dialogue. MILE should also begin work on developing a single shared disaster management plan with clear responsibilities and targets for reporting to guide political leadership.

**A new breed of municipal official required**

In reflecting on the skills and attributes required for a new breed of civil servant, the following recommendations are suggested.

**#1 Employ stricter HR quality measures to ensure appropriate candidates are appointed**

If the commitment to building a truly developmental state is real, then measures are needed to ensure that the appropriate calibre of official is attracted, appointed and retained. To engage effectively and meaningfully with stakeholders, municipal officials need three critical competencies:

So, to achieve something like this, you need to be working with people who have a, who deliver a triple whammy. They need to be skilled or clever enough to be able to cope with a whole lot of complex variables and manage those all at the same time. They need to have the openness and the humility to learn from mistakes, to learn from other people, to work in partnership. And they need to have the passion and commitment to delivering what we’re doing so that so that we don’t lose focus or lose energy. This isn’t a quick fix. This is a long complex process.

This is an issue that the Human Resources Unit must apply itself too as part of its strategic review processes.

**#2 Implement more effective staff training and multi-skilling programs**

Existing staff need to move away from their current and accustomed way of doing business. Therefore, every municipal employee needs to undergo retraining that shifts them from activity-based functioning that focuses more on tasks accomplished rather than outcomes achieved. This training should also be part of the induction
programme for new employees. In addition, the municipality needs to move towards developing a higher level, multi-skilled employee base, rather than single-skilled staff:

When you have the kind of workforce that is a single skill, it becomes extremely problematic. Your human resource bill, rent, salaries are bloated. The kind of work that they're doing is work that should be done by one person, but it’s done by 10 people.

These recommendations must be considered as part of a broader HR strategy that examines not only skills and competencies, but performance and consequence management. This means looking at the entire HR municipal system, as well as having stringent employee selection and retraining practices.

**Overhauling municipal systems to enhance productivity**

In eThekwini Municipality, like other South African municipalities, reskilling and improving the capability of staff is necessary but insufficient for building an effective and capable developmental state. Post-COVID, a fundamental overhauling of the municipal HR/employee systems was required.

**#1 Develop an integrated post-COVID HR development strategy and plan**

This strategy will examine all aspects of HR management and make suggestions for improving employee productivity. Key elements include HR and union relationships, consequence management, more effective rewards for performance, and the need for greater managerial accountability for staff productivity.

**#2 Implement a work redesign and reskilling intervention to suit the new normal**

What is required is a workforce that will be geared for change and the new normal, which means senior leadership have to look ahead, based on the post-COVID long-term strategy, and plan for jobs that may become obsolete in the future. As the unions will not allow any retrenchments, the system needs to be overhauled, as enough capacity exists but re-skilling is required. The interviewees accepted that this change will not be an easy process and will need to be driven by committed leadership.

**#3 Deal decisively with the issue of political interference by addressing the employee–councillor interface**

The issue of political interference is complex and sensitive but has to be dealt with in order to move the organisation forward. In addition, while the country recognises the need to address the political-administrative interface, there has been very little traction in this area. Given that eThekwini Municipality has new political leadership at the helm, this may be an opportune moment to tackle the “elephant in the room”, through expertly facilitated workshops, first only with councillors, then with senior managers and then jointly with both parties. A detailed intervention and strategy will be needed.

**Towards an integrated e-governance model**

Various contributors highlighted the strategic role of information and that improving municipal governance and decision-making requires data, analysis, research and strategy.

**#1 Develop a comprehensive post-COVID e-governance strategy and plan**

The need for a post-COVID e-governance strategy and plan was recognised, which would result in the creation of an e-governance model. While some initial work had been done, renewed focus and leadership is required to catalyse action. One key focus area is the role of e-governance for urban management, which one contributor hoped the strategy would unpack. The City Treasurer offered a useful perspective around e-governance, stressing the relationship between e-governance and financial sustainability. During the pandemic, the use of technology for billing proved invaluable. About 150 000 of eThekwini’s customers and all major bulk consumers paid by EFT and are currently billed electronically. More work is required to reach the remaining 50% of the municipality’s customer base. As part of the rollout here, the use of SMS billing should be expedited. The package of post-COVID strategic responses could include the launch of an intelligent data management platform.
Annexure

Overview of the Engagement Methodology/Process

Project exploration and selection
One of the unique features of the SOC 2021 individual State of the City reports is the attempt to “dive deep” and uncover the complexities of local governance. Rather than a clinical, academic look at the city, observing from a distance, the Durban research team partnered with those that tell the story (contributors) to help co-create a narrative that conveys a rich and textured account of the state of local governance.

In order to do this in an authentic way, the intention was to identify a real case study or project that could be used as a point of entry from which to reflect on urban governance issues. The selection of a geographically based project was foregone, in order to embrace the opportunity presented by the COVID-19 pandemic to reflect on how the municipality responded to this crisis during lockdown level 5.

What made the project unique were the principles of co-creation, active participation and buy-in from the municipal actors involved in the COVID-19 frontline response. Using engagement sessions with the key protagonists, who were involved as direct contributors to the emerging narrative, helped create a story that was largely their own. To widen the base of participation, the narrative was also tested with a larger cross-section of senior municipal officials who valued the process of engagement and helped refine the narrative. While these thoughtful reactions are documented separately as an adjunct to the narrative, they are an important part of the story itself. Indeed, these officials found the process of sharing the story to be an important catalyst to lobby for speedy institutional transformation as part of their post-COVID-19 strategic agenda.

When the research project was first conceived in February 2020, the intention was to select an inner-city project to use as a case study to reflect on the state of city governance in eThekwini. However, by March we abandoned this idea as the world was gripped by the COVID-19 pandemic. We realised that the crisis presented a unique opportunity to reflect seriously on state of city governance by putting the eThekwini response to the pandemic under the microscope.

Our municipal partners and the research team agreed that capturing the reflections on the experiences of key stakeholders on the frontline during lockdown level 5 would be a powerful way of gaining deep and meaningful governance insights. Thinking about the challenges and the opportunities that emerged from the response to the pandemic is not only instructive for the municipality but an important contribution to the bigger narrative on governance in South African cities.

Project interrogation
The story was carefully crafted, using personal testimonies from not only senior municipal officials and new political leadership who were directly involved in the frontline response, but also critical local non-state stakeholders. The insights obtained were very balanced and honest, with levels of criticism that demonstrated a real commitment to co-create a narrative that reflected the realities of the complex governance challenges faced by contributors during the pandemic. As the lockdown levels were gradually eased, the temporary sites for the homeless were shut down one by one, and conditions slowly became ‘normal’ again, there was a sense of the surreal nature of what had gripped the city, country and the world. Therefore, in engaging with the story, it is important to appreciate that the response was not a typical one but was precipitated by most unusual circumstances that called for unique, urgent and creative responses. Yet we believe that governance lessons will be most profound precisely during these unusual times, which prompted us to ask important questions about the nature of intergovernmental relations and the capabilities of the State: what enables and what constrains the State from being developmental.

Testing the narrative
Having crafted the co-created governance narrative and shared it with a larger municipal audience, the research team and municipal partner were pleasantly surprised with how well the story resonated with a cross-section of the senior municipal officials charged with institutional transformation in the city. More promising was the feedback received from listening to the story and the voices contained in the accompanying audiographic that was produced. This feedback served as an important catalyst to expedite the writing of a new story, a new beginning, that promises to lay the foundation for a new set of governance relationships within the city.

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7 Contributors were drawn from Asiye eTafuleni (NGO), Dennis Hurley Centre (FBO), DUT (academia) and inter-ministerial task team.
The original methodology proposed by SACN and agreed by the Research Team incorporated several different approaches to previous state of the city reports, including:

- Co-creating the project and the narrative.
- Identifying project champions within the municipality to help facilitate the development of the case study for that city.
- Testing the narrative with a broad audience from both within and external to the municipality through at least two round tables.
- Writing up vignettes extracted from the broader case study.
- Generating a creative product for distribution.

The revised methodology is depicted in Figure 7:

**Figure 7: Revised stakeholder engagement**

**Four Sets of Tailored Engagements for eThekwin:**

1. **Municipal Project Champions**
   - ONLINE engagement to confirm eThekwin approach
   - Early May

2. **Story collection: interviews/watsapp voicenotes**
   - Using COVID experience as context to reflect on governance: sharing stories
   - Mid-May

3. **Storyline testing & reflection: eThekwin officials**
   - To test and further refine the governance narrative from eThekwin
   - Early August

4. **Storyline testing & reflection: Strategic Stakeholders**
   - To test and further refine the governance narrative with all stakeholders
   - Late August
References


