



ETHEKWINI METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITY



A multi-stakeholder response to homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic

This case study shines a spotlight on the City of eThekweni's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular to the homeless during Level 5 lockdown in March and April 2020. The activation of a multi-stakeholder Task Team on Homelessness and other coordinating bodies illustrates how the municipal leadership and staff were able to mobilise its partners and stakeholders quickly and creatively, engage with other government spheres and unlock its own resources at a crucial time. As such, this story not only shows how the City and its staff and partners contributed to improving the health and wellbeing of the city's homeless, but also provides insights and lessons to build on in a post-COVID-19 world.





OVERVIEW

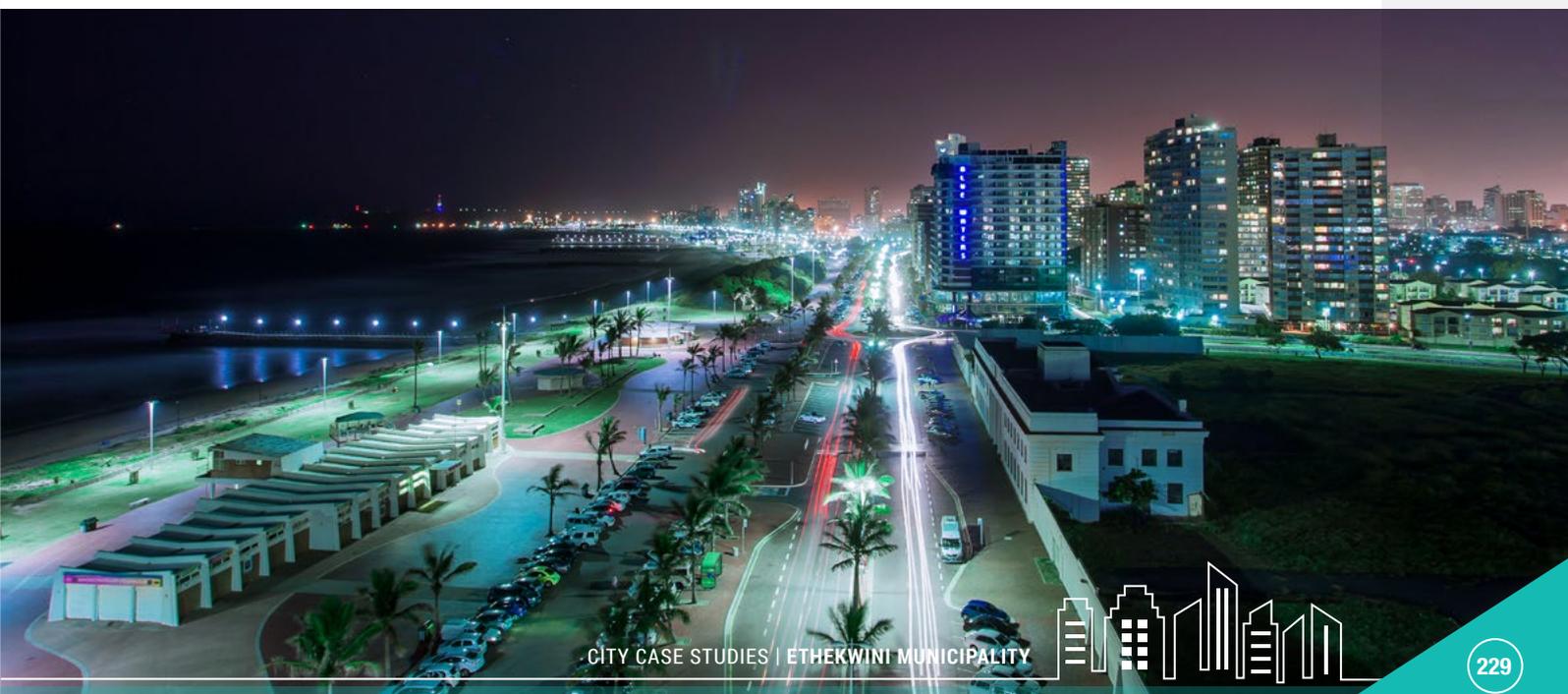
Like other South African cities, eThekweni Municipality was faced with an unprecedented crisis at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which triggered a nationwide lockdown beginning in March 2020. With national government being in emergency mode, pressure mounted on local governments to come up with rapid decisions and interventions to alleviate the socioeconomic consequences that emerged from the enforcement of the lockdown at the local level.

Setting up coordinating bodies

The municipality quickly established the Joint Operations Centre and the COVID-19 War Room, as well as a Multi-Disciplinary Task Team (MDTT), to provide technical expertise aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19, managing risk and communications, and implementing War Room recommendations. In the MDTT, stakeholders were equal partners able to monitor and solve problems. It also established the City Budget Forum, an innovative cooperative governance support mechanism that successfully brought together multiple government stakeholders working across different spheres and sectors. Through this vehicle, process issues were translated into regulations that were implemented and contributed to functional intergovernmental cooperation.

Assisting the homeless through multi-stakeholder partnerships

To coordinate an integrated response to the specific needs of the homeless during lockdown, the Deputy Mayor activated the City's existing Task Team on Homelessness, which had been in place before the pandemic. This Task Team brought together city officials from different municipal departments, as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and universities to provide services to the homeless. This involved the identification of 13 safe spaces across the city, which were equipped with ablution facilities, basic shelter and hygiene packs. The safe spaces included mobile clinics that screened and tested for tuberculosis (TB) and HIV/AIDS. They also offered wound care, referrals to local hospitals and psychiatric services (from one of Durban's leading psychiatrists). The Metro Police was brought in from the onset and played an instrumental role in the overall successful management of the sites through its human-rights approach to the homeless. Taken together, the response was so effective that the consequence was a significant improvement in the health and wellbeing of the homeless at the designated sites.





Effective political leadership is invaluable in times of crisis

Central to the activation of the Task Team on Homelessness was the role of the City's political leadership, illustrating the importance of politicians in harnessing the necessary resources, capacities and skills in times of crisis. As the head of the Executive Committee (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. In addition, the political leadership exercised important symbolic capital by being 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. In doing so, the leadership was also able to mobilise important social capital, by activating networks, which themselves unlocked more, much-needed resources. Going forward, the value of effective political leadership in responding to challenges at the city level should be recognised and supported.

The city as an enabler of multi-stakeholder collaboration

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. The horizontal cooperation between local government and its civil society partners showed that genuine stakeholder partnerships can 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. An important factor in the success of the response was that the City was able to build on the Task Team on Homelessness which had been in place before the pandemic and that there was awareness and recognition of the roles to be played by each partner. The municipality's role is to provide leadership and create an environment that allows each of the partners to be able to take action. Going forward it is important for the City to build on its role as an enabler, not a 'provider' of stakeholder engagement.



The pandemic as a catalyst for intergovernmental cooperation

The pandemic resulted in alliances and cooperation among spheres of government that would not have materialised as quickly under ordinary circumstances. Mechanisms such as the City Budget Forum represent an innovative cooperative governance support mechanism, which successfully brought together multiple government stakeholders working in different spheres and across sectors through the National Treasury's City Support Programme. This forum became an important mechanism that could be a powerful platform for building financial sustainability and addressing the city's major socioeconomic needs beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. It illustrates the importance of building on the insights from the emergence of such mechanisms in response to crisis and sustaining their function to promote long-term intergovernmental relations.

LEARNINGS

Learning from crisis as opportunity

While the pandemic revealed challenges within the municipal system and wider intergovernmental system, it also provided an opportunity for introspection about how to build a municipality able to respond to the ‘new normal’. Municipalities need to think about changing everyday practice and embedding the ‘new normal’, to prepare for other crises (health, environmental, resource or unrest) that will require them to respond and collaborate differently with multiple stakeholders on a much more continuous basis. As such, COVID-19 presents a unique opportunity to create bold new strategy, policy and operating procedures, which not only respond to crisis but also anticipate forward planning for the municipality to respond proactively in various areas. This is illustrated by the creation of a platform for transversal thinking about long-term strategy as one of the offshoots from the Multi-Disciplinary Task Team. Including a reflection on the lessons learned from the City’s COVID-19 response in its next Integrated Development Plan (IDP) would represent a further opportunity to integrate multi-stakeholder approaches in addressing issues of sustainability and resilience going forward.

Building on excellence

The eThekweni 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. Instead, in its response to the pandemic, many City officials showed capability, innovation, excellence and a willingness to go beyond the call of duty during this crucial time. Going forward, the focus needs to be on building on the emotional intelligence shown by these officials and programme champions as an example of what human-centred, empathetic, progressive, flexible and ethical public service looks like. This would be in addition to employing appropriate candidates, addressing technical skills deficits and enabling officials to focus on development outcomes rather than on municipal activities only. Officials must embrace the notion of being civil servants who are committed to serving the public interest, while acknowledging the strengths of different stakeholders and enabling shared decision-making and assessments. This also requires leadership support for the creation of an enabling municipal system, which supports creativity and innovation, and rewards excellence.

The need to rethink approaches to informality

The city’s engagement with the homeless in response to the COVID-19 pandemic revealed a need to focus on the impact of COVID-19 on informal workers and to rethink existing approaches to informality. The informal economy is not only important for sustaining people’s livelihoods, but also represents a critical pathway for growing the inner-city economy and could make a very real contribution in assisting the municipality in its interventions and relieving its economic burdens. Hence, post-COVID, it would be important to build on this recognition and devise a more consistent approach and commitment to supporting individuals who occupy public spaces and other people living in sub-adequate shelter or working in the inner-city’s informal economy.

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 city’s post-COVID 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.

