



Publication: Financial Mail - Inside
Title: New mindset for SA cities
Publish date: 17 Nov 2022
Page: 54

Reach: 12673
AVE: R 82302.42
Author: Herb Payne

Special report

The South African
Cities Network



New mindset for SA cities

Balancing the books and becoming green are not mutually exclusive

● With COP27 global climate change conference topics on everyone's lips, a warning has been sounded that South African cities don't have the luxury of sitting and waiting for sustainability funding – such as the R400bn promised by Europe at COP26 – to fall into their laps. Cities themselves need to realign their thinking, their budgets and their management to ensure that they are attractive destinations for such investments.

And investment secured must be targeted at addressing 21st-century skills requirements in increasingly low-carbon urban economies as much as it does in meeting capital development needs. That will be vital to determining how people, particularly young people, can be absorbed into the system in the decades to come. Today, for example, electrical engineers might focus on high-voltage systems fed by Eskom, but in tomorrow's world they will have to have green energy-orientated expertise.

That was a key message to emerge from the three-day Cities Festival, run by the South African Cities Network (SACN), celebrating the 20th anniversary since its establishment in 2002 as a learning network for the metropolitan and city political leaders and administrators who run the country's metros. The metros were responsible for generating 70% of GDP at that time.

The SACN, which also pulled together the Integrated Urban Development Frame-

work – which among other things seeks to address the integration of a fragmented infrastructural legacy of apartheid in a just transition – now works with metros to co-create solutions to challenges, making it an applier as well as a generator of knowledge, particularly in the fields of policy and advocacy and of peer-to-peer learning.

Essentially, cities and metropolitans need to act now if they are to have any chance of being ahead of the development curve in two decades' time, says SACN executive manager programmes Nosipho Hlatshwayo.

An issue identified at the conference that needs to be resolved is governance, as cities are still not achieving clean audits. Related to governance is the coalition chaos that is bedevilling service delivery as political parties focus – since November's local government elections – on gaining power at a local government level.

Hlatshwayo says a number of solutions to the coalition dilemma are being explored. Typically, she says, one could look at the US system, where the president and the party political representatives are elected in separate ballots. We could look at applying that here by electing metro mayors and councillors separately.

In a similar vein, there are Scandinavian and German examples which might also form part of the solution, where coalition agreements are legally binding so cannot simply be tossed aside on a political whim, and also legally bind the signatories to implement defined policies.

Resolving the coalition di-



lemma, particularly now that coalitions are part of South Africa's political fabric, would also contribute towards good governance.

Equally important is efficient and comprehensive data collection, down to the minutest detail, so that cities and metros can plan and implement initiatives on an informed basis rather than on guesswork. This has long been one of SACN's objectives, having first mooted the establishment of a data almanac in 2004 as a living resource of city data, covering five sets of indicators: urban population, productive city, inclusive city, sustainable city and well-governed city indicators.

Though uptake has been slow, cities are coming on board, with eThekweni municipality recently launching its "one truth" strategic hub platform. It is aimed at creating a central data hub that enables the city, through accumulating and analysing all data collected, to gain a real understanding of what's happening in their domain, so that trends are revealed – right down to accur-



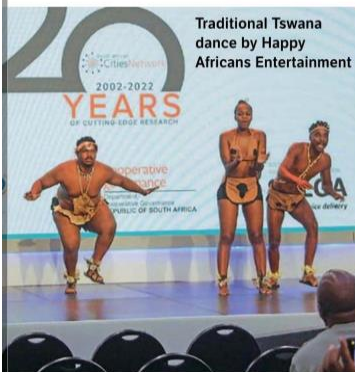
ate information on how long, for example, it takes a waste collection truck to do its rounds.

The accumulation of such information, which could include evidence about truck delays because of potholes or mechanical failures, can then be used to improve service delivery. Similarly, data collected at a day clinic showing a preponderance of people with stomach bugs from a particular location might point to the need to address water treatment problems in a particular area.



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these on themselves. Where the funding for electricity might now be through Eskom, in future, the focus needs to be increasingly on local authorities as the organisations that actually bring water and electricity to homes, working with independent power producers.

Most of the metros are in the throes of creating independent sources of electricity from Eskom – though these might be motivated as much by the need for greater sustainability and resilience in the face of the economic and social costs of long-term load-shedding as they are aimed at gearing to meet the needs of climate change.

eThekweni, for example, has been working on a project involving the conversion of waste gas into electricity. The City of Johannesburg has worked on a similar project, to supplement supplies in its own city. The City of Cape Town already has a hydropower station. In a similar vein, The City of Tshwane also tried to establish a waste-to-electricity project, but it ran into difficulties.

“These are still fundamentally at the stage of being case

studies, and the problem is that they are not happening at the rate or scale that the economy requires to address the energy issue,” says Hlatshwayo.

“Among the hurdles are governance issues that prevent these projects from being rolled out on the required scale. Not least of these is that municipalities rely on electricity distribution as a source of revenue. This creates a complication when a private contractor looks to feed electricity into the city’s grid.”

Hlatshwayo says a similar situation is panning out with waste collection, where some cities use private contractors to collect and separate waste at source for recycling, while others are still wedded to the old concept of the city collecting everything and dumping it in a landfill site.

One of the dilemmas in making the change is that whereas it is easier using only one truck to collect all waste, two or more are required to collect separated material. This has led to “waste pickers” playing a significant and vital role, both in terms of waste collection and separation and in creating informal employment, though some municipalities simply regard them as a nuisance. Work is being done to better assimilate this element through solutions such as waste separation centres.

There is, she adds, also a valid argument that before addressing high-minded projects such as waste separation, the issue of providing universal waste collection to include many areas that are now excluded should be the priority of metropolitan municipalities.

The message to the cities is that all these issues need to be mainstreamed and addressed as a priority. “It is true these changes require money, but the longer we procrastinate, the more it is going to cost, and the greater the impact on the environment. And, while they do require start-up capital investment, the cities should also recognise that these projects of-

ten have a positive effect on long-term revenue generation and job creation.

“The reality is that the cities are moving over from a mindset that applied to city management from the time of the Industrial Revolution to one that embraces sustainability, social responsibility, clean energy, efficiency through the use of data, taking into account what needs to be achieved in future rather than what was done before. But this needs to be done far faster and in a just way to the benefit of society at large.”

The reality is that, along with climate change, there are a host of challenges confronting hard-pressed metros and their communities that will manifest in the next 20 years as the country’s population swells by around 20-million people and urbanisation continues apace.

Some cynics may argue that the city should be focused on meeting current targets and balancing the books rather than focusing on issues such as becoming green cities.

However, Hlatshwayo says, these two do not need to exist in parallel universes and they are both essential.

“For South African cities to move forward, you need the whole of society and government working together, as we all have a common goal. Cities cannot do it in isolation, nor can the private sector, academia, NGOs and NPOs. There are countless examples of people and organisations that have taken the initiative and are not waiting for councils to hand them something on a plate,” she concludes.

As the SACN continues to host the Urban Festival, it wants to thank the sponsors and lead partner, the Gauteng Partnership Fund (GPF). The SACN and the GPF share a common objective of facilitating and enabling urban development and transformation in South African cities. **x**

Writer: Herb Payne
Sales: Debbie Montanari