

# PRACTICE GUIDE

**SMME Inclusion in the Construction Sector**  
Lessons of Good Practice from City Officials



**2025**

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**“If you work in construction in this country and you’re not prepared to work with SMMEs, you’re in the wrong space.”**

# INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, the construction industry was meant to be a vehicle to alleviate poverty through the creation of unskilled and semi-skilled jobs, and through mandatory subcontracting to local small, medium and micro-enterprises (SMMEs).

In areas struggling with unemployment and poverty, local infrastructure projects offer jobs and economic development opportunities in construction. Unskilled or semi-skilled community members can register as contractors, and previously excluded local SMMEs are able to subcontract to the mainstream construction industry.

However, the construction sector has not been able to create the expected number of opportunities for SMMEs due to decreasing investment in infrastructure by municipalities and a general lack of economic growth. The scarcity of opportunities has resulted in new-entrant SMMEs flooding the space, creating a high-stakes, competitive and often hostile environment where large numbers of SMMEs fight for just a handful of subcontracting opportunities, sometimes resorting to unlawful tactics to put themselves ahead.

In recent years, unlawful disruptions on construction sites across the country have increased, complicating the inclusion of local SMMEs.

Media reports commonly attribute these disruptions to the “construction mafia”, which is variously described as organised associations (or “local business forums”) of SMMEs in the construction industry.

## ABOUT THE PRACTICE GUIDE

This Practice Guide aims to assist officials who implement projects in communities, with good practice on how to include SMMEs in the construction process and navigate the challenges of SMME tensions and the potential threat of site disruptions.

These lessons of good practice come from the real-life experiences of city officials who have found innovative ways to address the complexities of SMME inclusion.





Access the full research report by SACN (2023):  
[Keep the bus moving: SMME inclusion in the construction sector](#)

## LOCAL BUSINESS FORUMS

Local associations of SMMEs in the construction industry self-identify as “local business forums”, which are intended to promote the use of local, black labour on infrastructure development projects in the areas within which they operate. Characteristics include:

- A defined spatial jurisdiction, which is often (but not always) related to ward boundaries and may become the organisation’s namesake – for example, the Newtown Business Forum operating in Newtown, Johannesburg.
- Members who are emerging businesses offering semi-skilled or unskilled labour in the construction sector but may also include other sectors, such as private security, cleaning and funeral services.

Some business forums have used criminal tactics, such as extortion, violence and intimidation, to secure construction subcontracts or a share of the project’s value in cash for their members. This has led to the media using “construction mafia” as a popular catch-all phrase for local business forums in the construction industry that have become synonymous with extortion, demanding work or protection money.



### Impact of the “construction mafia”

In 2023, research by the South African Cities Network (SACN) found that site disruptions on large-scale city projects were a major factor in the slow rate of infrastructure delivery, with many projects dragging on for much longer than intended. These practices by “local business forums” result in huge amounts of public money and resources being wasted and threats to the lives of city officials caught in the crosshairs. It is estimated that in January 2020, disruptions by business forums cost the national economy R40.7 billion. The impact has been far worse in KwaZulu-Natal, affecting, “between 2016 and 2019, almost all construction sites within the province”.

Source: Irish-Qhobosheane J. 2022. Extortion or Transformation? The construction mafia in South Africa. Geneva, Switzerland: Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, page 2.



Access the GI-TOC (2022) research on “construction mafias”:  
[Extortion or Transformation? The Construction Mafia in South Africa](#)



## South Africa's Preferential Procurement Policy (PPP)

The aim of the Preferential Procurement Policy of 2017 was to promote black economic empowerment and the inclusion of SMMEs and emerging contractors in public sector procurement. The 2017 Preferential Procurement Regulations required cities to allocate 30% of any public infrastructure project valued at over R30-million to “local content”, as a subcontract to the main contractor. Although the revised 2022 regulations do not mention subcontracting SMMEs, cities continue to implement the “30%” approach, as the expectation has been created within communities.

## THE CHALLENGE FOR CITIES

For cities, the challenge is that there is no cohesive vision of what SMME inclusion should look like or what it should achieve. City departments and project managers are left to try and work it out on their own and often use very different approaches to dealing with SMMEs.

**This Practice Guide aims to close the gap and provide good practices for including SMMEs in construction projects.**

The practices are based on the real-life experiences of city officials who have found innovative ways to address the complexities of SMME inclusion. Much of the information is drawn from Keep the Bus Moving: SMME inclusion in the construction sector, a research report published by the South African Cities Network (SACN) in 2023.

After examining different approaches to SMME inclusion, the Practice Guide proposes guidelines for including SMMEs, from project conception to life after the project.



**“Projects are implemented differently in different communities – there is no exact formula.”**

# KEY ELEMENTS OF SMME INCLUSION

Cities do not have a common approach to dealing with SMMEs. The most common is a reactive “business as usual” approach, where cities step in late to quell tensions and try keep the project moving, and sometimes resort to accommodating the demands of business forums. At the other end of the spectrum is a proactive/participatory approach involving an inclusive social compact (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Spectrum of SMME engagement methods**

Source: Interviews with city officials

Adopting such contradictory approaches makes it difficult for the public sector to present a unified stance to combat extortion and results in public sector entities undermining each other's efforts. Furthermore, cities and departments do not share experiences and best practices with each other, and project managers are often left to work out how to navigate the SMME landscape on their own.

Nevertheless, innovative practices have been shown to have a hugely positive impact on the inclusion and development of SMMEs. For example, development entities, such as the Mandela Bay Development Agency (MBDA) in Nelson Mandela Bay and the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA) in Johannesburg, use a hands-on, participatory approach and proactively include SMMEs in construction projects.

## SMME INCLUSION TAKES TIME AND RESOURCES

SMME development is resource- and time-intensive. Government, which is typically outcomes-oriented, rarely gives enough time or resources to facilitation processes, which are crucial for SMME inclusion. And yet, where city entities have invested in SMME engagement, development and inclusion, projects have benefited.

The institutionalisation of an SMME inclusion approach requires a robust process and building a reputation of zero-tolerance to extortion. The process includes establishing an inclusive project steering committee, building relationships with community leaders, sharing upfront risk awareness and consensus-building, and including SMMEs in project design. Other factors include taking SMME grievances seriously and having clear communication and engagement channels.



## SOCIAL FACILITATION IS KEY

SMME inclusion needs to be seen as part of a broader community participation approach that begins long before the construction phase of the project. The process needs to be rigorous and transparent in order to build consensus and trust.

Construction projects often take place in a sensitive and hostile environment, as trust in the government has eroded to a devastating point in many communities. However, through prioritising social facilitation processes, government entities can forge constructive working relationships. Using expert social facilitators and providing sufficient time and resources will ensure that grievances are dealt with robustly and meticulously.

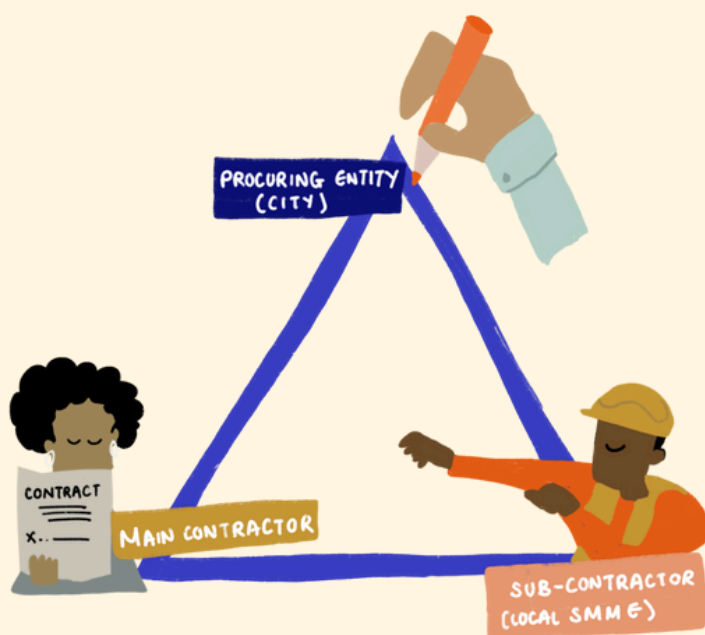


## SUPPORT TO SMMEs IS ESSENTIAL

For new SMMEs, subcontracts can be difficult to manage, and they often find themselves struggling to meet deadlines and manage financial returns. SMMEs often feel exploited by the main contractor or experience financial losses due to a lack of experience, guidance, or supervision. The development and on-site support of SMMEs is crucial for professionalising the industry and seeing SMMEs succeed and grow beyond the project. Where city entities have invested in SMME development and on-site supervision, projects have benefited by staying on track and meeting quality requirements.

## DIRECT INTERFACE WITH SMMEs IS BEST

The main contractor may be legally responsible for procuring subcontractors but is not necessarily best suited to dealing with the intricacies of navigating SMME dynamics. Rather than relying on the main contractor to do all SMME engagement, subcontracting and development, the procurement entity (government department or agency) should be actively involved with SMMEs – and not wait and react when the project stalls due to disputes. This means interfacing directly with SMMEs; treating them with respect and professionalism; guiding, supervising and encouraging them to develop through improving their CIDB grading, growing their businesses and becoming employers in their communities.



**Figure 2: The procurement network**

Source: Adapted from Cawe A. 2022. 'Delangokubona' and the distribution of rents and opportunity: An exploration of tensions over race-based policies of redress and redistribution in South Africa. WIDER Working Paper 2022/58



# THE PROCUREMENT PROCESS MUST BE TRANSPARENT

A transparent process and reliable SMME database reduces the risk of the procurement process being manipulated. Potential points of vulnerability in the procurement process, which often result in contestation, include interference by unsuccessful SMMEs challenging appointments and seeking to disqualify successful SMMEs; the involvement of ward councillors and community liaison officers (CLOs) to influence appointments; and powerful forums threatening the contractor involved in the bid process. Sometimes SMMEs are used to fight political battles.



# POLICE RESPONSE AS A LAST RESORT

Many business forums do not employ overtly violent tactics and take care to avoid direct links to acts of physical violence for fear of incrimination. However, the procurement of subcontractors is often manipulated at points that are not technically illegal. In this grey space, where lines of legality are blurred, police response is only the solution for overtly violent and extortive incidents on site. Often, site disruptions can be avoided through negotiation and social facilitation and relying on the community as a buffer to neutralise hostilities and keep the project going, but this may not always be the case. In many instances, a swift police response to violence or the threat of violence is necessary to ensure the safety of everyone on site, which must always be the top priority. In contentious areas with business forum linkages to organised structures of crime, proactive measures should also be taken to ensure the security of the site.

**“The ability to navigate inclusion of SMMEs determines the project’s success.”**

# GUIDELINES FOR SMME INCLUSION

These guidelines are based on real-life examples of what has been found to work by various city and state entities when navigating challenging SMME and community environments. The guidelines are broken down into six phases which are largely chronological but require iteration during the project cycle. Social facilitation is the guiding principle throughout the project cycle.





# 1. PROJECT CONCEPTUALISATION

**“We are dealing with desperation – ‘we are here to create employment for you guys’. How do we integrate skills development in the delivery of the project?”**



**The bottom line: Public construction projects need to be deliberate in maximising employment opportunities for both SMMEs and local labour.**

- ✓ Design projects in order to maximise a variety of skillsets, including unskilled and semi-skilled project aspects that can be managed by SMMEs. Examples include paving, landscaping, painting, mosaicking, etc. This needs to be specified upfront and as part of the terms of reference for the architects and engineers, not as an afterthought once the project has started.
- ✓ Specify to expert consultants, such as the architects and engineers, to utilise low-tech solutions where possible to avoid reliance on large-scale contractors only. Think about how to incorporate marginalised groups such as people with disabilities, the elderly and women through work which is less physically demanding.
- ✓ Design the projects to include maximum opportunities for local labour that can be employed directly by the main contractor. This is a different process to the subcontracting of SMMEs, but will create benefit and therefore buy-in from the community if the project is seen to include work opportunities.
- ✓ Work with the engineers and architects to conceptualise how the project work packages can be divided up into many small packages rather than a few large packages for subcontracting to SMMEs. This lowers the stakes and spreads the opportunity further among the community.
- ✓ Integrate into the project design and allocate project budget towards skills development for SMMEs, including workshops on managing subcontracts, navigating the tender process and business development.

**“There is no shortcut to promoting economic inclusion in the delivery of infrastructure.”**

- ✓ Ensure that social facilitators and engagement specialists are included in the project team and, if necessary, covered within the budget allocation, if these skills need to be outsourced. Work closely with these social facilitators and involve them in every step, including project conceptualisation.
- ✓ Provide sufficient resources and flexibility in the project timeline and budget to cover in-depth community consultation processes throughout the entire project. Develop an engagement plan with the social facilitators during the project conceptualisation plan based on previous experience and best practice.
- ✓ Preempt delays and setbacks within budgets and timelines based on the possibility of community unrest, which might even be unrelated to the project.
- ✓ In addition to the specific project, cities should work towards establishing a city-wide database of SMMEs per ward that can track successful SMMEs and reward them with future opportunities. SMMEs that genuinely want to grow and develop need to be recognised.





## 2 . COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

**“The more you engage with them the better... threats come when you don't engage.”**



The bottom line: Robust and ongoing community engagement is needed, using experienced social facilitators with an understanding of the social context.

- ✓ Use experienced social facilitators who understand the project's context to work with and interface with the community and establish a contract or “constitution” of engagement principles, based on equal inclusion of all voices. Communicating with a demonstration of goodwill, respect and empathy builds trust early on.
- ✓ Arrange large-scale community meetings before starting to procure and subcontract SMMEs. Clear communication about the project assists in managing expectations early on.
- ✓ Establish a community steering committee with equal representation by key stakeholder groups through a democratic process with the broader community. SMME business forums or associations should be included on the committee, provided they are not overly represented.
- ✓ Prioritise all stakeholders equally in community engagements. SMMEs are only one stakeholder in a community and, while they might be the most dominant in community meetings, their voices cannot be prioritised.
- ✓ Avoid prioritising the employment aspects of the project too early on (which is what the SMMEs will be vocal about) by bringing in other community stakeholders. Including the community in making certain decisions, such as the design aspects of the project, builds trust with the broader community and obtains general buy-in for the project.
- ✓ Work through the ward councillor always, but also be aware of the different power dynamics at play. A strong ward councillor can lead to the success of the project.

**“The first 2 months of a project is tough – SMMEs come with many questions and demands.”**

- ✓ Establish an understanding of the structures of power, the different stakeholder groups, the legitimacy of the ward structure, the political divides, potential gang jurisdictions, and any other ground dynamics that are important in the context of the community. Develop an understanding of the cultural norms and practices and demonstrate an understanding and respect of this.
- ✓ Select a community liaison officer (CLO) strategically and through the ward councillor but also be aware that this is a position with a lot of power that can be abused at times. The community needs to respect the decision of the CLO appointment and not perceive any hints of collusion or patronage.
- ✓ Establish a database of SMMEs in the area with the help of the ward councillor. Determine what skills currently exist and what latent skills can be developed further.
- ✓ Understand which government projects have taken place previously in the area and what worked or did not. Don't start from scratch, speak to these government departments and entities to understand the dynamics on the ground. You may find that you need to repair relations due to previous breakdowns in trust.
- ✓ Identify existing business forums and SMME politics and associations, and understand how they have operated in the past.
- ✓ Provide clarity to the community of the project's benefits and how it will improve the lives of residents, beyond the employment opportunities only. Community buy-in and ownership over the project will be the necessary buffer if hostilities with SMMEs develop.
- ✓ Determine what else the community needs beyond this project that could be provided with minimal resources. For example, youth training, assistance to establish an area safety forum or help in unlocking other bureaucratic processes that the community has been struggling with.
- ✓ Be led by how the community wants to engage. This might include a certain individual (aside from a ward councillor) chairing the meetings, or meeting in specific neutral locations, as well as monthly or even weekly meetings with the steering committee.
- ✓ Partner with local NGOs and organisations, if necessary, to assist with convening meetings and facilitating co-design and participatory methods.



### 3. THE PROCUREMENT PROCESS

**“How do you craft your SCM process to achieve the principles of inclusive economic development?”**



The bottom line: Subcontracting SMMEs is a highly delicate process that needs to be perceived as fair and transparent by the community to have legitimacy.

- ✓ Build SMME inclusion into the terms of reference for the main contractor, who is legally responsible for the subcontracting. It is important here to ensure that the procuring entity and the main contractor are on the same page with regards to how to include SMMEs in the project.
- ✓ Ensure the process of hiring local labour (which is also the responsibility of the main contractor) is deemed fair by the broader community. For instance, randomly select individuals from the community to be included in the team of construction workers. Often ward councillors and community liaison officers will assist with who gets hired. It is important that there are no signs of collusion in the hiring of local labour, as this can undermine the subcontracting of SMMEs.
- ✓ Be transparent in communicating the procurement process and open about what is happening, the benefits to the community and information about the jobs available, so that no false information can be passed on by labour brokers, chiefs or ward councillors. In addition to public meetings, use public boards to advertise to the community information about the project (when, where and job requirements). While the main contractor is legally responsible for subcontracting SMMEs, the city department or entity responsible for the project will more than likely be required to take an active role in the procurement, such as engaging with the community around the process.
- ✓ Communicate early on an absolute commitment to zero-tolerance of extortion or any types of manipulation of the procurement process.





- ✓ Provide training on the subcontracting process (if necessary) to assist interested SMMEs in preparing documentation for their applications.
- ✓ Work through the ward councillors to assist with the subcontracting process, but be aware of power dynamics and potential links to certain forums, which might require circumventing the ward councillor and working through the community steering committee.
- ✓ Use the database of SMMEs developed in the Community Engagement Phase to determine eligible SMMEs. Check the addresses of SMMEs prior to procurement to ensure they are eligible to apply for the work. This will address attempts by local business forums or SMMEs to undermine or discredit certain SMMEs, to prevent them from getting the work, by claiming they are not local (i.e., from another area).
- ✓ Clarify the definition of “local” with the community and agree on the spatial boundaries of who is able to apply for the labour and the subcontracts – this may differ from the ward boundaries.
- ✓ Consider using a random selection of eligible Grade 1 SMMEs to assign subcontracts, which may be seen as fairer than a rigorous selection process. This is because Grade 1 SMMEs are not required to have a track record or qualifications, making it difficult to justify the selection of SMMEs based on merit.
- ✓ Ensure that supply chain management in the city or entity understands the broader economic development agenda and the complexity of the community dynamics. It is possible to have a more developmental approach to the procurement of SMMEs while still operating within the legal frameworks.

**“We had to approach the work as one team – community developers need to understand SCM, and SCM officials need to understand community dynamics.”**



## 4. SMME SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT

**“Many SMMEs are not from the construction background. SMMEs learn as they go.”**



The bottom line: Investing in SMME development and on-site supervision is critical for ensuring the project's success and creating local economic development.

- ✓ Ensure that the terms of the reference for the main contractor clearly articulates the development of SMMEs, to ensure contractors are committed to developing and including SMMEs in the project. You cannot work with contractors who are reluctant to engage with SMMEs.
- ✓ Stipulate in the contract with the main contractor that dedicated on-site supervision of SMMEs must be provided (with particular support to Grade 1 SMMEs), to ensure adherence to work quality, budgets and timelines.
- ✓ Ensure that the project team includes a dedicated SMME development manager to assist the appointed SMMEs with training and business development – emphasise quantity surveying, budgeting, managing labour, managing timelines and business administration. Ideally, the city should employ the SMME developer full time. If no such position exists, then an SMME development specialist should be hired as part of the project consultant team.
- ✓ Assign an internal quantity surveyor to workshop quantities with SMMEs, as this is often where SMMEs lack experience and end up under- or over-supplying materials and thus losing profit.
- ✓ Develop with the ward councillor, the community steering committee and any business forums from the area, an approach to training and developing unsuccessful SMMEs. Such an approach has been shown to appease unsuccessful SMMEs and prevent contestations, while also creating an expanded skills development programme.
- ✓ Record in the SMME database any skills development and training undertaken by SMMEs, to ensure future projects make use of the investment into upskilling efforts and that SMMEs (successfully appointed or not) are rewarded for completing training programmes.



## 5. CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

**“After appointing an SMME there will always be a group asking, ‘why we were not appointed?’”**



**The bottom line: A proactive approach to ensure site security and safety needs to be combined with a conflict-resolution response when hostilities arise.**

In particularly hostile environments that have a history of violent site disruptions, proactive measures to be taken include:

- ✓ **Appoint and brief a site manager to oversee the security and safety of the site.**
- ✓ **Establish a response team to assess any disruptions to the site and implement a plan based on the risks.**
- ✓ **Engage and make contact with the Brigadier of the area, and ensure you have the correct contact person at the local SAPS station recommended by the Brigadier.**
- ✓ **Engage and make contact with the local SAPS station and notify them of your work in your area and obtain further key contact numbers.**
- ✓ **Report immediately to the site manager and response team any violence, site disruptions or threats. The report should include a clear description of the event, the location and any known or perceived risks associated with it.**

The site disruption response team will assess the nature, extent and potential impacts of the disruption. They should gather and analyse all available information related to the disruption, including safety hazards and risks to personnel, critical infrastructure and surrounding areas to establish the response required.

In severe cases (e.g., intimidation, trespassing, use of firearms and assault):

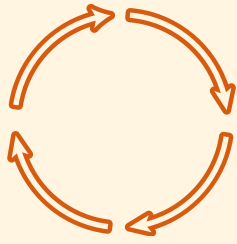
- ✓ Report the matter to SAPS for criminal investigation. SAPS will provide a case number and investigate the matter. Reporting matters for criminal investigation and following through with the process assists in serving as a deterrent for future occurrences.
- ✓ Report the incident to the Special Investigating Unit Hotline: 0800 037 774, which has been set up to respond to crimes related to disruptions of construction sites.
- ✓ Consult an attorney to explore civil law options (e.g., interdicts or protection orders), if necessary. In such cases, it is important to be in a position to identify the representatives of the business forum.

Conflict resolution is preferable:

Adopting a police and legal response could result in further breakdowns in relationships, whereas conflict resolution may take longer but produces more sustainable results.

- ✓ Understand at which point securitisation needs to be escalated. For instance, after the list of successful SMMEs is revealed, there may be grievances and contestations that appear hostile but can often be de-escalated without the need for police or additional security.
- ✓ Use the community as a buffer to safeguard the project when navigating hostilities as they arise. This can only be achieved if sufficient buy-in and ownership of the project has been established early on during the community engagement phase and if the procurement process is transparent and seen to be legitimate. If the key stakeholders within the community are committed to seeing the project completed, they are often better placed than the police or private security to protect the project by calling to order hostile groups of SMMEs.
- ✓ Keep the project moving and avoid construction delays during the conflict resolution process. If community engagement breaks down to a severe extent, change the meeting venue to a more neutral site and invite key leaders in the city to address the community meeting. This can assist in keeping the project moving.

**“When we encounter SMME issue, we bring the community in to deal with it. Don’t only focus on the SMME voice, you will be bullied into a corner, make the community part of the SMME discussions.”**



## 6. LIFE AFTER THE PROJECT

**“Construction has a timeframe, within two years it's done, what happens to the SMMEs? How do you then grow a breed of SMMEs going forward?”**



**The bottom line: Future opportunities need to be created for SMMEs to ensure continuous growth and development.**

SMMEs that are supported and developed during the project are able to improve their CIDB grading and apply for further work in the future. SMMEs with experience in delivering projects should not remain Grade 1 registered companies. To ensure continued growth of SMMEs in the construction sector, cities can consider the following:

- ✓ Update regularly an SMME database, to keep track of SMMEs and their development and performance in projects.
- ✓ Find ways of using SMMEs and individuals for work beyond the project construction, such as for ongoing maintenance and operations. This creates sustainable employment opportunities as well as a sense of project ownership.
- ✓ Rotate the SMMEs used for operations and maintenance opportunities, to increase the reach of opportunities and for fairness. This system can be conceptualised during Project Conceptualisation Phase, when future maintenance budgets need be considered, and then further developed during the Community Engagement Phase.
- ✓ Determine the feasibility and need for youth development programmes and learnership training integrated within the project, that could assist unemployed youth with developing CVs, and applying for job opportunities, beyond the construction project only. This creates further buy-in from the community beyond opportunities for SMMEs only.

# CONCLUSION

No matter the approach taken, the process of including SMMEs will never be without complexities and tensions. But SMME inclusion is the reality of all large public construction projects that cannot be wished (or paid) away. Both city officials and contractors need to come to terms with what is required to keep projects moving and promoting economic development; from navigating a delicate and sensitive process, to bringing on board adept social facilitators and finding ways to manoeuvre through the tensions, complexities and blockages. Local business forums have the potential to be crucial pieces of the local economic development puzzle and provide opportunities for SMMEs to grow and develop without the use of violence and extortion.

This Practice Guide should be read as guidelines only, and not as a foolproof solution to including SMMEs. The success of SMME inclusion depends on the context, which will have its own set of challenges and require a unique response. Such context-appropriate solutions will require iteration and a degree of innovation and creativity. Many of these examples of good practice have emerged from city officials desperately trying new things, as they attempt to navigate unforeseen challenges and try to get projects unstuck.

It is important to remember that no one should feel alone. Every government department and entity is trying to navigate these challenges and sometimes succeeding, but often failing. This Practice Guide is an attempt to learn from government departments and entities about these successes and failures and will, hopefully, assist city officials in developing coherent and holistic approaches to SMME inclusion based on transparency and hands-on engagement.





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