

Hundreds of schools in the country exist in contravention of the norms and standards regulations. The money is there to fix the problem, but implementation is held back by complex layers of red tape

Why South Africa's schools are behind the curve

ANN CROTTY

Sibulelo Ngcauzele, principal of Vukile Tshwete Senior Secondary School in Keiskammahoek, 40 minutes from King William's Town, looks forward to the new school year.

The reason for his new-year cheer is a mid-December call from Coega Development Corp (CDC) informing him there will be a site handover on January 22.

"This makes us confident something is going to happen," says a principal who has seen more than his share of broken promises.

Of course, the CDC promised in 2016 that the wooden ex-army barracks, which have been in a dangerously dilapidated state for years, would be demolished and a new school erected. Three years ago soil samples were taken, meetings held and plans drawn up for a R16m school. When nothing happened there were more meetings, more promises and more plans.

At one stage the CDC told the school governing board (SGB) to set up a steering committee and do a skills audit of local community members so they could be involved in the building. There was palpable excitement — not just about a new school but about the prospects of employment. But 2016 came and went without any sign of building work or even a hint of preparation.

Zamie Mabamba, a parent who chaired Vukile Tshwete's SGB, was dismayed by the lack of action. "We've no idea why government is punishing us," she said at the end of 2017, when there was still no sign of building activity and 325 pupils had to endure conditions that contravene binding regulations.

The technical-sounding "norms and standards" regulations, introduced in 2015, are intended to regulate when schools should be built and upgraded, the materials to be used, the size of classrooms, and the basic services schools should have.

Equal Education (EE), which describes itself as a democratic movement of pupils, parents, teachers and community members, campaigned for years to get government to provide basic infrastructure to all public schools.

In a recent report, "Implementing Agents, the Middlemen in Charge of School Infrastructure", the NGO points out the "norms and standards" required that all schools should have had access to water, sanitation and electricity by the end of 2016.

Those built of inappropriate materials — mud, zinc, wood or asbestos — should have been demolished and replaced.

Vukile Tshwete represented a contravention of most of the regulations. It was built decades ago of wood that's now rotten, and the toilets are life-threateningly unhygienic.

Spirits rose in June 2017 when, without warning, workmen arrived and constructed a sturdy steel fence around the school and the large vacant plot of land next to it.

The workmen disappeared, leaving behind a gleaming, multi-million rand ClearVu fence, considerably more valuable than the school. By one estimate, the fencing could've cost 15% of the R16m budgeted for a new school. So money was not the issue. Months later, with no sign any work would be done, spirits dropped.

In response to media criticism, CDC marketing and communications head Ayanda Vilakazi issued a statement in December 2017 defending the corporation's role as an implementing agent. Vilakazi explained that the



IN LIMBO: In June 2017 a sturdy steel fence was built around Vukile Tshwete Senior Secondary School and a plot of vacant land adjacent to the school. There's still no sign of building work at the site earmarked for the construction of the new school although a site handover is scheduled for January 22.



DECAY: Vukile Tshwete Senior Secondary School operates from an ex-army barracks, built decades ago of wood that's now paper-thin and rotten, and the toilets are life-threateningly unhygienic. In 2016 the Coega Development Corp (CDC) promised a new school. This has yet to happen. Pictures:

RANDELL ROSKRUGE

Vukile Tshwete project had been split into two phases. The first was to identify a new site, and fence it and the existing school.

"The second phase includes the submission of the planning, project scope, cost and quality of infrastructure, which have been submitted to the department, and approval received," said Vilakazi. "Thus, the construction of the school will start in early 2018."

That was the last the school heard from the CDC. Throughout 2018 the ClearVu fence taunted pupils, teachers and the SGB; a reminder that some things could get done. And then, just as the year came to a close, the CDC called to say there would be a site handover on January 22.

There seems little point in suggesting to Ngcauzele that the CDC sprang into action — or the promise of it — in December and that this may be nothing more than a year-end desk-clearing exercise.

"The new site will be handed over to the contractors, who will be introduced to the project steering committee, which comprises members of the SGB, the community and Sanco [SA National Civic Organisation]," says Ngcauzele. The CDC has confirmed the "anticipated site handover", explaining that the delay was due to the late receipt of the work permit from the labour department.

The principal is hoping a new school will

stop the outflow of pupils, whose numbers have fallen from a high of 600 a few years ago. Some pupils just dropped out; others, whose parents were able to scrape together funds, went to schools further away. The dangerous and dilapidated surroundings are a demotivating reminder to the pupils of how unimportant they're considered to be.

On the other side of King William's Town, the principal of Imiqhayi Senior Secondary School is not feeling quite as upbeat about prospects for 2019. Luvuyo Bakana has heard nothing since mobile toilets were installed to replace the pit latrines at his school.

Years ago the Development Bank of SA visited the school and determined that it had to be demolished and rebuilt. It was easy: the 70-year-old building is so unstable two classrooms were blown away in strong winds a few years earlier. From just a quick glance, it's evident the rest of the school could crumble at any time.

Like Vukile Tshwete, Imiqhayi's continued existence represents a contravention of most of the "norms and standards" regulations. But unlike Vukile Tshwete, no one has formally communicated with the school. Essentially, the 182 pupils have been abandoned. Bakana fears the department might have tagged it for closure.

In April, Waco International subsidiary

Abacus Space, which builds modular units, relieved some of the pressure when it donated two new classrooms to the school. Bakana and the pupils were thrilled that not everybody had abandoned them, but the principal says more classrooms are needed.

In 2004, then-president Thabo Mbeki promised that pupils would no longer have to endure dangerous conditions at their schools. At the time there were 572 schools in the province that had been built with illegal materials. According to EE's report, at the beginning of 2018 the province was still home to 471 of the 600 SA schools built with these materials. The situation persists, says EE, despite the government's comprehensive commitments, the creation of complex systems and budget allocations.

An earlier EE report on the chronic inability to resolve the problems in the Eastern Cape attributes the situation to a complex combination of human resource deficits, political contestation and poor accountability.

Essentially, it's a microcosm of all that's holding the entire country back.

Good intentions are laid waste by the complex overlay of the national basic education and public works departments, which own the school land. It doesn't help that the chronically challenged construction sector is also required to play a central role.

EE's latest report contains details and flow charts of just what, and who, is involved in a school-building project. It's mind-numbingly complex and provides some justification for the creation of the all-powerful "implementing agents". These key players receive a hefty fee of up to 10% of the cost of a school project to co-ordinate the process and fill any capacity gaps.

According to the National Treasury, their role includes the planning, management and rollout of the design and delivery of infrastructure; planning and management of procurement; liaising between the client, contractors, suppliers and consultants; and making payments. Implementing agents are contractually bound, by their agreements with the state, to meet several key performance indicators. Given their central role, it's probably inevitable that EE regards these agents as key to the province's failures. The EE is not alone. In February 2013, members of parliament's standing committee on appropriations questioned if they were necessary.

More recently, Themba Kojana, head of the Eastern Cape education department, said: "If it were up to me, we wouldn't have implementing agents. We would hire contractors directly." As EE sees it, a lack of public information has allowed ineptitude to thrive. Without this, civil society cannot compare the actual work of implementing agents against key performance indicators.

Detailed information of the progress of projects does exist in the grand-sounding "education facilities management system" database, but it is not publicly accessible.

Remarkably, given that it's had 10 years' experience with the problem, EE is also optimistic about 2019's prospects for Vukile Tshwete. Leanne Jansen-Thomas, head of communications at the NGO, says the organisation is encouraged by a number of recent developments. A new provincial minister and president who is aware of the importance of education should also help.

So perhaps Ngcauzele is right to believe 2019 will be a year in which some promises will be kept. — *Financial Mail*