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The power of collaboration

SUCCESS STORY: SCHOOL HAS WORKING LOOS

Busi Mavuso

I often write about Business Leadership South Africa's (BLSA) efforts to improve the business environment – from driving solutions to confronting logistics challenges. But another important part of our strategy is far more local: the performance of municipalities in delivering basic services.

Last week, I got to see a success story of what can happen when business and local government work together. There are many stories about municipal infrastructure breaking down and a lack of engineering skills available to fix it.

But there are also stories about getting infrastructure back into working order and seeing it improving lives for residents.

Kids can't go to school thinking they had better not need to use the toilet. Yet, for many schools that is what they must do, because the toilets at their schools don't work.

I visited a school in the Eastern Cape that until recently could only have kids for an hour or two a day because there were no working toilets. But that has been fixed thanks to efforts of business, municipalities and the Eastern Cape cooperative governance and traditional affairs department.

For the past three years BLSA, together with USAid, has been funding a capacity building programme in the provincial department and various municipalities. This has allowed for the deployment of retired engineers and financial and technical experts to help improve service delivery.

It is working. The school I visited now has working toilets. The kids are back to full school days. It is one of eight schools that BLSA has funded, among 90 in total that various businesses have backed to have their toilets fixed.

It has required work with municipali-

ties to get water infrastructure working to deliver to the schools, which also means it gets water to residents and businesses. I also visited a pumpstation in the Nelson Mandela Bay municipality that has been restored through the partnership.

The capacity programme is led by the National Business Initiative and its Technical Assistance Mentorship and Development (Tamdev) project. The initiative sees the secondment of retirees to help fix infrastructure, but also ensures transfer of skills from retirees to permanent engineers who will be responsible for long-term maintenance.

I met young municipality employees who have been mentored by the retirees, gaining skills and confidence thanks to the programme. This ensures there is a long-term legacy – that we are not intervening ad hoc to fix specific problems, but ensuring that there is permanent capacity creation.

The programme goes hand-in-hand with the expanded public works programme, so workers join business secondees and in the process acquire skills. Some have gone on to start their own businesses.

Seeing infrastructure working is heartening. During my visit, I felt that when we work together, we can solve difficult challenges. The work I saw last week would not have been possible without the efforts of people – from the local municipality through to the head of the school.

There are real unsung heroes who are not in the headlines. These people work tirelessly to ensure that our people have access to facilities. Tamdev is able to unlock specific challenges that they face.

While modest in scale, it was a demonstration of how we can make a difference in people's lives by working together. I applaud the Eastern Cape government and municipal officials who have helped make it happen.

► *Mavuso is CEO of Business Leadership South Africa*