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Working together

When business and local government work together, much can be achieved



OPINION
Busi Mavuso

I often write about our efforts to improve the business environment, from driving solutions to our energy crisis to confronting our logistics challenges.

But another very important part of Business Leadership SA's strategy is far more local — improving the performance of municipalities in delivering basic services to residents.

Last week I got to see what can happen when business and local government work together.

There are many stories about municipal infrastructure breaking down and there being a lack of engineer-

ing skills available to fix it. But there are also stories about getting infrastructure back to working order and seeing it result in improved lives for residents.

Our children can't go to school thinking they had better not need to use the toilet. Yet for many schools across our country, that is what they must face, because the toilets at their schools don't work and are sometimes dangerous.

Just over a week ago, I visited a school in the Eastern Cape that until recently could only have children for an hour or two a day because there

were no working toilet facilities. But these have been fixed, thanks to the combined efforts of business, municipalities and the Eastern Cape Department of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs.

For the past three years BLSA, together with USAid, has been funding a capacity-building programme in the provincial department and various municipalities in the province. 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 children are back to full school days.

It is one of eight schools that BLSA has funded among 90 in total that various businesses have also backed to have their toilet facilities fixed

"... (toilets) have been fixed, thanks to the combined efforts of business, municipalities and the Eastern Cape Department of Cogta."

It has required working with municipalities to get water infrastructure functional to deliver to the schools

which also means it gets water to residents and businesses.

I also visited a pump station in the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality that has been restored through the partnership.

This was very much a collaborative effort. The capacity programme is led by the National Business Initiative and its technical assistance mentorship and development (Tamdev) project.

This takes on board retirees to help fix infrastructure, but importantly also ensures a transfer of skills from the retirees to the permanent engineers who will be responsible for long-term maintenance and development.

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, as we are not intervening ad hoc to fix specific problems, but ensuring that there is permanent capacity creation.

The programme works with the Expanded Public Works Programme, so workers join the business people who have been seconded and in the process they acquire skills. Some have gone on to start their own businesses.

Seeing infrastructure working is heartening. During the visit last week I felt that when we work together we really can solve difficult challenges.

There are people at all levels who are working really hard to do so.

The work I saw last week would not have been possible without the efforts of people in the province, the

local municipalities and all the way to the principals of the schools.

There are real unsung heroes who are not in the headlines. These people work tirelessly in difficult conditions to ensure that people have access to facilities.

Tamdev is able to unlock specific challenges that the people face.

It was a genuinely heartening thing to see. While modest in scale, it was a demonstration of how we can make a real difference in people's lives by working together.

I applaud the Eastern Cape government and municipal officials who have helped make it happen.

It shows what is possible in our country.

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