

'If the leadership of this city is not capable of, or amenable to, the challenge [of change], it is time they walked away and made space for a new paradigm'.

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Midi and the mind-set gap

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ROB Haswell does a good spin on the challenges facing Msunduzi Municipality in the November 23 issue of *The Witness*. It creates a challenge for the partnership formed by the Msunduzi Innovation and Development Institute (Midi), which had its public launch at last month's summit, and resolved to establish a new task team to deal with matters of "governance, accountability and transparency" in the city's administration.

There is no smoke without fire. My proposal to establish that task team was supported without contestation at the closing plenary of the summit of the Msunduzi Innovation and Development Institute (Midi) last month. It was informed by a series of invited and highly respected keynote speakers, who highlighted the urgency for the municipality to deal with political conflicts and administrative failings, or risk losing a sustainable, developmental future.

The Built Environment Support Group (BESG) was another civil society player which did not sign the pledge to work together for the advancement of the city, but for very different reasons to A Rocha. While Allen Goddard observed recently that the detailed work of the task teams was not captured in the conclusion of the summit, BESG accepted that this is the start of a long, and challenging, process of engagement between civil society and local government. We are prepared to take the challenge — and the risk — of trying to make that relationship work.

We have been in that process of engagement for 25 years, as a nongovernmental organisation (NGO) that has transformed its relationship to local government through phases of resistance, reconstruction and development, and service provider, into a critical engagement and interface between the government and its citizens. BESG's only objection to signing the pledge was that it committed participants "on behalf of all citizens of the city". The voice of the poor was not there and much as we work closely with them in their communities on a daily basis, we cannot profess to speak for them. They comprise a vast majority of the households in the informal and "less formal" settlements, with rampant unemployment (especially among a frustrated youth), the highest provincial HIV infection rate, and increasing housing backlogs.

Dr Mamphela Ramphele's presentation of the "Dinokeng Scenarios" (please visit them on www.dinokengscenarios.co.za) at the Midi summit provides a context both for creating space for the voiceless in our society, whose needs on the development spectrum are the greatest, and also for understanding the critical role of intermediaries such as BESG. BESG emerged out of the civic struggles of the eighties, to secure a place for Africans in the apartheid city. Founders of BESG, many of whom now occupy prominent positions in the new dispensation, defended people living in informal settlements against the excesses of the police and municipal bulldozers. It was a "walk apart" scenario, where there was a complete breakdown in the relationship between the state and civil society.

From 1991, BESG responded boldly to the winds of change by "walking together" with a local government that was struggling to find a new legitimacy and a mandate to deal with what was to come. We were an active player in the city council's Low-income Settlement Task Team that tried to grapple with the challenge of rapid urbanisation, as a result of some seeking economic opportunity, and others seeking refuge from the violence between ANC and IFP-aligned communities in Imbali, Maqonqo and other areas.

As Ramphele noted, "walking together" is a significant challenge for both government and civil society, when they have come from a position of mistrust and unequal power relations. While BESG was openly welcomed by progressive elements and occupied a void in a radically changing local planning framework, many officials from days gone by resented BESG's high profile in local government affairs. From 1994, BESG became a significant player in low-income housing development, specifically in situ upgrading of informal settlements. It was a case of working with the people, by the people, for the people. Some old-guard officials tried to neutralise our development work and block efforts to release land for low-income housing, openly accusing us of being "too pro-poor".

We rose to the challenge of development in the city with a series of innovative demonstration projects. When the city council was unable to procure a system for supplying building materials for housing beneficiaries, we worked with those communities to develop one of the first two Housing Support Centres in the province. In its day, it was so successful that former municipal manager Thabani Zulu prepared a report for Council's Executive Committee seeking approval to continue the support centre in the northern areas, and establish a second support centre in Edendale. Today, we enter our fourth year of a legal action in the Pietermaritzburg High Court to recover R297 000 we incurred in employing community labour on the municipality's behalf. It is an action that an NGO can hardly afford and which council's legal adviser has consistently sought to frustrate through requesting repeated postponements and then seeking to have our claim set aside on the basis that it is time-expired.

We also noted, after the first few new townships were developed, that they looked as if they had never been developed after one season of rain. Topsoil washed down the slopes to silt over tarred roads and block stormwater drains. Rubbish was not collected. Residents complained they could not see approaching taxis because the grass was never cut. The response from officials was that the beneficiaries were unable to pay rates (there was a vain attempt to bill them R40 per annum,

before they realised the collection costs far outweighed the potential rates income), and the city could not afford to extend its services.

Our response was the development of the Community-based Maintenance Programme, which at its peak serviced 4 500 households and created 46 jobs in those communities. The programme won a string of local and international awards, and was studied by the Department of Provincial and Local Government as a model of transformative municipal service delivery. In 2006, the municipality decided to privatise the service. While we do not have issue with the legislative imperative for the municipality to put the work out to open tender, the processes behind the scenes told another story.

In one area, a local development trust established by BESG wanted to tender. It withdrew at the 11th hour because it was concerned for the safety of its staff. In another area, the ward councillor blatantly went to one of the supervisors, a local resident, and told her that her days were numbered as he was “bringing my own people in”. Corruption indeed runs deep. We periodically visit those areas for staff induction and residents routinely complain about the poor service delivery since private contractors took over. Where is the performance monitoring?

Then there is the whole issue of transparency. Our last substantial piece of work in the city was a research project in 2007 to evaluate what we saw on paper as a very progressive indigent support policy, providing rates relief and free basic services to those who could least afford them. We found it lacking in a number of areas — dissemination of the policy, administrative support to an application process, and not least, billing: the vast majority of our sample enjoyed unlimited free water because their meters were not read and their bills not posted. In spite of the mayor, at the launch of the policy, saying that there would be one debt write-off to clean the slate and strict credit control thereafter, every year we have seen write-offs of between R62 million and R100 million.

The findings and recommendations of the research were welcomed by both the municipal manager and his manager for strategic policy and research. But when we presented the findings to his management team, the SEM Finance demanded to know what mandate we had to undertake the study and challenged the veracity of the report in a similar manner as a rat trapped in a corner. Worse still, when his manager for strategic policy and research proposed that we present our findings to the Executive Committee (Exco), so that it could make amendments to the policy, another senior manager objected on the grounds that “members of the public attend Exco”.

This culture of opaqueness is at the root of the mistrust between our local government and its citizens. It is most aptly summed up in the self-contradictory statement made by the deputy mayor after banning the press from an Exco meeting earlier this month: “The ANC stands for openness, but I am not at liberty to discuss what happened in the meeting.”

I do not believe that BESG’s commitment to working for the upliftment of this city, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalised, can be questioned. So where are we today?

The municipal manager, as a trustee of Midi, has a conflict of interest. His feature on November 23 creates the veil of a credible response to a few of the worst administrative excesses highlighted by the media recently, such as the uncontrolled overspending on overtime, and the meter-reading contract.

It fails to acknowledge the public criticism by leading, progressive figures in our city and their plea for a turnaround strategy, and rubbishes the public perception that there are deep-rooted structural problems in the administration of the city. Let us dissect some of the spin.

Is the revenue budget short? We receive equitable share to provide services to indigent households and do not spend it all for the purpose intended. And when residents in the suburbs who do pay rates constantly complain of basic failings such as refuse collection, has our rates base diminished over the years?

On capital expenditure, the budget was fully committed for the first time last year, but was the expenditure balanced and aligned to the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), and is the IDP reflective of the multiplicity of development needs across the municipality? Why do we suffer chronic shortages of refuse collection vehicles, power outages and a stressed sewerage treatment works that is stifling development in many parts of the city?

Turning to the overtime question, one cannot attribute blowing 75% of the annual overtime budget in three months to the need to provide security for councillors. One has to ask if their jobs, which pay much less than the jobs of security staff supposedly protecting them, are worth the trouble and danger. What are they doing that makes being a councillor so dangerous? As far as the overtime budget is concerned, if security is an issue, it did not flare up due to a sudden, unforeseen event. It should be planned expenditure and therefore built into the annual operating budget, likewise with the need to employ waste collection staff because there are insufficient vehicles from one year to the next.

The valuation roll is a classic example of citizens “walking apart” in utter frustration. The municipal manager decries residents who are taking legal action — after a valuation and revaluation by the same consulting firm, and a string of exposés of crazy outcomes failed to produce a sober and measured response from officials. I was informed by an official in the estates department that a supplementary roll produced only last month has been withdrawn, but people are being billed based on reassessments without being formally notified. It is not the percentage of objections but the manner in which affected residents have been dismissed that is objectionable.

Haswell must realise that spin is an express form of denial that died at Polokwane. The ANC national leadership has seen the writing on the wall. Regrettably, it is trying to “fix” corruption and maladministration from the top down, and perpetuate a “walk behind” scenario where government knows best and makes things happen without active engagement with civil society. In Msunduzi, we have the potential to walk together through Midi, but if we do not grasp that opportunity with complete honesty, frankness, humility and mutual respect, we shall either continue to stand apart or walk apart. If the leadership of this city is not capable of, or amenable to, the challenge, it is time they walked away and made space for a new paradigm.

Cameron Brisbane is executive director of the Built Environment Support • Group.

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