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**“Where the Rubber Hits the Tar”, Assessing Problems of Capacity Building for Poverty Alleviation and Development: The Case of a Local Municipality**

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**Introduction**

Changes in Local government in South Africa are now a common reality, following the successful introduction of similar changes in provincial and national government structures. Prominent examples of such changes include the politico-administrative re-organisation of local government, its legal definition and the provision of local government structures with the relevant resources. Overall, such developments have been positive and welcomed by many residents and citizens, but they have equally brought about numerous problems for the municipalities. These include problems of financial and project management, amalgamation of the former racially and ethnically segregated administrative structures, boundary demarcation, demographic representation, human resource development, crime — in fact, almost every aspect that the new South Africa has had to grapple with since its first democratic general elections in 1994 and subsequently the 1995 non-racial local government elections. This paper will highlight some of these problems but focus only on problems of capacity building aimed at poverty alleviation within a local municipality. Finally, in the conclusion the paper examines possible solutions to the problems highlighted in the study and gives recommendations or suggestions for future research.

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As used here the term "capacity building" means the strengthening of human resource capability including the building of relevant infrastructure necessary for an effective and efficient municipality. For instance, the Department of Provincial and Local Government's Guidelines for Municipalities (2001:400) states that the success of any municipality's performance management system "rests on the capacity of line managers, executive management, councillors, citizens and communities to fulfil their role...". Among others, suggestions for improving such capacity (e.g. through training for the managers, councillors and the public) are given. The position of this paper is that it is only when such capacity has been built that the municipalities would be squarely on the road towards poverty alleviation<sup>2</sup> and development. By poverty alleviation is meant the reduction of both the burden of poverty and number of people who live well below the poverty datum line as conventionally defined. The paper follows the current definition of poverty as centred around alleviation and reduction, although the argument is that we must aim ultimately at poverty eradication.<sup>3</sup> The term "development" itself is used to refer to the reduction of illiteracy, homelessness, the improvement of standards of living, the extension of health, education, social welfare and other services to the poorest of the poor.<sup>4</sup> For all these facets of development to succeed at the local government level there is a need for strong municipalities that have both the capacity and ability to translate policies into action. Thus,

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<sup>2</sup> Currently in the literature, analysts, development experts and international donor agencies use the terms "alleviation", "reduction", and "eradication", interchangeably when referring to poverty (see Kayizzi-Mugerwa, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> The United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aim to reduce and eradicate extreme poverty and hunger by 2015, and to "promote poverty reduction and human development as the key to sustainable social and economic progress" (World Bank (2003).

<sup>4</sup> All these are needed to promote social and economic development (Zybrands, 1998:217).

adequate and skilled personnel or human resources are required to ensure this, particularly given the fact that local government — “which was a provincial function in terms of the Interim Constitution — has become a sphere of government in its own right” (Cameron, 2002: 479). While acknowledging that over the past few years “...municipalities have built up capacity”, the White Paper on Local Government nevertheless recognised that “policies and laws alone cannot bring about developmental local government” (<http://www.polity.org.za/html>). People, especially those with skills, are needed to implement these policies.

## **1. The nature and scope of the problem**

This paper examines problems of capacity, specifically human resources, in the rural local municipality of Nkomazi.<sup>5</sup> This municipality is part of the Ehlanzeni District Municipality of Mpumalanga province, which also includes the local municipalities of Thaba Chweu, Mbombela, and Umjindi. An overview of the Nkomazi local municipality's Integrated Development Plan (IDP) suggests that many improvements have been recorded ever since the process of municipal transformation began shortly after the demise of apartheid. However, as the IDP itself indicates, the “major problem” was “not the plan itself but the implementation thereof” (IDP, 2003, p.3). In fact, even the IDP office of this municipality was reported to be lacking capacity, “both in terms of human and infrastructural resources” (IDP, 2003, p.3). As was the case with some local government structures in the province, this municipality did not have adequate

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<sup>5</sup> Nkomazi has all the features of a 'rural' municipality, but the relatively urbanised neighbouring towns of Komatipoort, Malelane and Barberton also surround it.

staff at the time of writing. Several reasons were given for this, notably inadequate finance, especially for the municipality's Human Resources section, lack of trained staff, insufficient infrastructure, the political-administrative interface, and changes affecting virtually all municipalities in most provinces.<sup>6</sup>

This is in spite of the very large and especially rural population that is served by this municipality as indicated in Table 1 below:

Table 1 Indicating baseline demographic information

Munic Code	Name	Population	Urban	Rural	Households	% of District Population	% of District Households
MP321	Thaba Chweu Municipality	155134	95094	60040	26560	14.2%	13.3%
MP322	Mbombela Municipality	479490	27104	452386	91640	43.9%	45.8%
MP323	Umjindi Municipality	48577	11698	36879	11677	4.4%	5.8%
MP324	Nkomazi Municipality	409703	7644	402059	70154	37.5%	35%
DC Totals		1092904	141540	951364	200031		

Source: Municipal Demarcation Board (2002)

Notably, the Municipal Demarcation Board also states that both the Umjindi and Nkomazi municipalities in 2002 had "the smallest operating expenditure with budgets of R63 313 252 and R48 888 977, respectively."

It has been stated elsewhere that almost ten years after South Africa's first democratic general elections service delivery is bound to be one of the key issues (if not *the* key issue) that will be foremost in most people's minds as they

<sup>6</sup> Amongst others, municipalities in South Africa often experience a whole range of problems related to the transformation or reform of local government structures or institutions.

examine the country's first decade of democracy.<sup>7</sup> However, service delivery largely depends on adequate capacity, as understood in the traditional human resource management framework of staff development through training, education and development of personnel, as well as the provision of relevant resources (e.g. finance and infrastructure) to the municipality. The DPLG's Draft Guidelines (2003:42-3) clearly link capacity building to performance management, emphasising, "As far as possible the training and support for managers, councillors and the public should be provided internally...Training for managers and councillors should preferably be provided by available in-house training capacity or contracted in under clear and strong specifications as to how the [performance management] system will work." In most municipalities, the introduction of a performance management system is often the crux of the problem because municipalities usually lack in-house capacity and continually have to rely on consultants; Nkomazi was not an exception in this regard.

## **2. Background to the research**

This paper developed out of a fact-finding study that we conducted<sup>8</sup>, as part of research that was commissioned by the European Union in its quest to render assistance to South Africa's local government authorities. For the sake of confidentiality and to conceal the participants' identities in the study, names and certain details that might identify the respondents have been omitted. However,

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<sup>7</sup> Maphunye (2003). No doubt, issues of service delivery will feature prominently in political parties' campaigns as they prepare for the 2004 general elections.

<sup>8</sup> The writer with Vino Naidoo, Fellow researcher at the Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria.

and where possible, the context of the study is highlighted as follows. According to the municipality's IDP (2003:4):

Nkomazi forms the eastern section of the Lowveld area of the Mpumalanga Province. Nkomazi is located approximately 350 km east of Gauteng and consists of a wedge of land between the Kruger National Park (north), Mozambique (east), Swaziland (south), and Mbombela and Umjindi Municipal areas (west). The Maputo Corridor traverses the area of Nkomazi and has a significant influence on the growth and development of the area. The Nkomazi area has excellent potential derived from its central location within the wider region of Mpumalanga, Swaziland, Northern KwaZulu-Natal, Southern Mozambique and the new Trans-frontier KNP [Kruger National Park]. The new spirit of borderlands cooperation and increasing cross-boarder interaction has given a unique prominence to Nkomazi, which was previously extremely marginalized. Prominent towns include Malelane, Komatipoort, Hectorspruit, Marloth Park, Kamhushwa and Kamaqhekeza.”

As earlier stated, Nkomazi municipality itself is part of the bigger Ehlanzeni District Municipality that includes the Lowveld Escarpment, Graskop, Lydenburg, Sabie, Hazyview, Nelspruit, White River, Barbeton, Komatipoort, Malelane, Marloth Park, and Pilgrim's Rest. Both the Ehlanzeni District Municipality and the Nkomazi Local Municipality had 44 and 60 councillors, respectively — the majority of whom belonged to the ruling African National Congress (ANC).

At the time of conducting the research, we learnt that the Municipal Manager was on suspension, apparently for “irregularities”, but neither were we able to speak to him directly to establish the reason(s) for his suspension nor to identify the nature of these “irregularities”. As a result, much of the information that we

required was not provided (at least in the detailed format in which we wanted it), although we managed to obtain sufficient information from the other council officials. The Municipal Manager is quite a powerful and significant figure in a local municipality. As Ababio and Makgoba (2002:18) explain, the Municipal Manager plays a dynamic role within local government and this position is often entrenched by statutory provision. Not only does the Municipal Manager facilitate "interaction and communication between the political and administrative units of the municipality", but also "...the execution of all decisions taken by the municipal council, including the Executive Mayor" (p.19). Thus, the suspension or dismissal of such a powerful figure within any municipal not only undermines the capability of the institution and individuals within it, but also affects the morale of both the elected and appointed officials within such a municipality.

As Cameron (2002:476) notes, "Historically, local government in South Africa was controlled tightly by provincial government and was a mere creature of statute." At that time, i.e. before 1994, issues of capacity building and the role of the municipality in general were discussed and resolved centrally by the provincial administrations. Now that this has changed, capacity building has become one of the challenging issues that every municipality must face and resolve. Thus, lack of capacity in the Human Resources (HR) section of the municipality becomes a worrisome factor when one considers that it is the same municipality that must serve as the "engine" of growth for its own jurisdiction.

### **3. The Study**

The research methodology comprised structured and unstructured interviews with selected senior council officials and questionnaires based on a qualitative data.<sup>9</sup> The literature review was based on an analysis of relevant documents such as newspaper articles, books, Internet and other sources that were combined with the interviews conducted.

The researchers collected the bulk of the information on site at the municipality in August 2003 and later through telephone interviews. In addition to meeting with senior municipal officials, the researchers also met with the Planning and Information Management Systems (PIMS) office of the Ehlanzeni District Municipality in Nelspruit as well as with other pertinent individuals, and consulted relevant documentation on the processes of local government in the area.

Furthermore, this researcher sought to understand the problems of capacity building in the municipality from the perspective of the Dependency and Underdevelopment framework of development — which, among others, relies on the centre-periphery argument to explain contradictions between central and field administration (e.g. Cardoso, 1973; Frank, 1971). Writing within the neo-Marxist framework, these writers attempted to understand development (or lack of it, which they called 'underdevelopment'). For instance, Frank began "by assailing 'dualist' approaches. The notion of dualism in a Third World context has been

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<sup>9</sup> Information gathering was by means of a pre-prepared questionnaire provided to the researchers by the DPLG and European Union Programme Management Office.



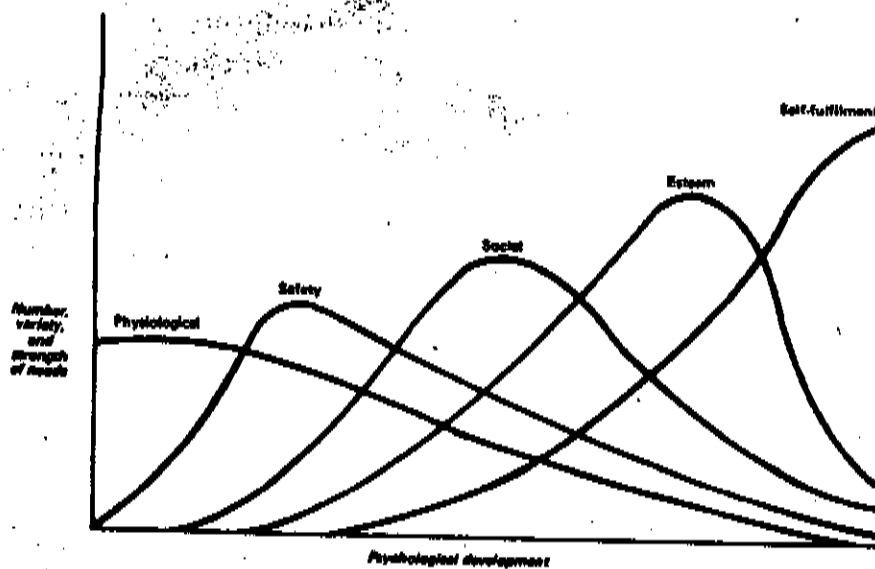
employed by a number of writers, working within a range of disciplines" (Randall and Theobald, 1998:130-131). In an apparent support for this position, almost two decades ago Phillip Mawhood wrote, "We shall understand very little of the African experience if we forget the duality of the societies: the gap which divides an educated and economically powerful elite from the rest" (Mawhood, 1993).

The dependency paradigm has been used to refer to unequal relationships either between two or more countries or regions within the same country. In the case of countries, one country (usually the more affluent and overseas-based) may be perceived as the "centre", while another — often impoverished and economically disadvantaged — may be seen as the "periphery" or satellite. Thus, according to the Dependency and Underdevelopment framework, there are tensions and contradictions between the overseas "powers" and their "3<sup>rd</sup> World" peripheries, because of the economic dependence of the latter on the former. In the case of local government, we may view the relatively affluent metropolis (Nelspruit, in this case) as the "centre", and Nkomazi as the "periphery" given the huge socio-economic gaps between the two localities. Thus, Nkomazi and other adjacent local municipalities could be seen as being in a "dependent" relationship with the main towns and cities in the province.

To understand the needs of the municipality and its officials, I examined the sociologist Maslow's (1954, cited in Armstrong, 1993:263) Hierarchy of Needs theory and used it as a guide. This theory, amongst others, posits that the needs

of individuals (employees in Maslow's case) can be categorised and arranged hierarchically or as in a pyramid (Table 2 below). At the bottom of this hierarchy are usually the immediate and most pressing needs of an individual, which Maslow called the "physiological" needs because they deal essentially with the most basic requirements of an individual's survival, e.g. food, water, sex, sleep, etc. Next are the "safety needs", which refer to the need for safety and security, e.g. housing, a safe living environment, stability and protection (Armstrong, 1993: 262).

**Table 2**



**Progressive development of needs (Maslow 1954). (Source: Armstrong, 1993: 156)**

Safety needs are followed by what Maslow called the "social needs", which include the need for love, affection and belongingness. "Esteem needs" are next and refer to how an individual needs to build her/his self-esteem, self-respect, prestige and status. At the top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs is the need for

“self-actualisation” or a stage of self satisfaction reached by the individual. Among others, this revolves around the growth, advancement, and creativity that individuals yearn for and eventually feel they have achieved, when capacity building would have succeeded within an organisation. Despite the weaknesses of this model (e.g. it has been criticised for assuming that needs can be easily arranged hierarchically), it could be useful as a tool to explain capacity needs within the municipality’s workforce.

#### **4. The Uniqueness of this Municipality?**

In Mpumalanga province the municipalities, both district and local, are all faced by almost similar challenges emanating from the apartheid period and the subsequent but short-lived political instability immediately after the 1994 general elections.<sup>10</sup> Thus, what could be termed the “uniqueness” of the Nkomazi municipality has to be understood in this light. Geographically, as stated previously, the municipality is strategically and well placed in that it is part of the Maputo Corridor that serves as a conduit of economic development between South Africa and its neighbours, Mozambique and Swaziland. This augurs well for future local, national and international development that would benefit the municipality and the province. However it is not immediately clear as to how the municipality’s present lack of capacity affects its future operations.

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<sup>10</sup> For instance, the Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG) report of 10/09/2003 indicated abuse of funds by the Mayor of the Delmas municipality. Allegations of fraud and corruption in the Nkomazi municipality were also being investigated by the PMG (<http://pmg.org.za>).

From the information obtained, Nkomazi has an Integrated Development Plan Co-ordinator, and an IDP Manager, a role that, from the researcher's understanding, is currently performed by the Municipal Manager. The fact that this municipality at least had an IDP, despite the problems of articulating the contents of this plan into action, means that it was a step ahead of other municipalities in the province. However, a detailed assessment of the performance of the municipality in a number of areas including its work load, service delivery backlogs, time available and spent, etc. has shown a need for additional staff that is skilled or even multi-skilled to pursue the municipality's ideals as stated in its IDP.

Nkomazi municipality certainly appears to be one of the fastest growing local government structures in Mpumalanga province, at least according to the latest provincial media release (5 August 2003) that indicates that the municipality has since 2002 spent close to 4million rands on the construction and renovation of schools, community halls and the construction and re-gravelling of roads, upgrading of streets and bulk water skills, including the construction of bus and taxi ranks in the municipality.<sup>11</sup> Despite the low incidence of crime in the Nkomazi area (see below), "Cross-border crime and illegal aliens are regarded as the biggest threat towards safety and security in the area" (IDP, 2003: 63).

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<sup>11</sup> [http://www.mpumalanga.mpu.gov.za/pr.../nkomazi\\_municipality.htm](http://www.mpumalanga.mpu.gov.za/pr.../nkomazi_municipality.htm)

## **5. Inadequate Personnel and Untrained Officials**

Like many other municipalities in the province (Mpumalanga) and elsewhere in the country, the Nkomazi municipality faced the challenge of inadequate (in some cases none) capacity. As the Municipal Demarcation Board (2002) indicates, only Mbombela municipality with 1334 employees had the most staff members. "All the other municipalities [had] staff complements between 238 and 368 and [appeared] to be understaffed. In particular [Ehlanzeni District Municipality] with 238 employees [seemed] to lack personnel" (Municipal Demarcation Board (2002).

The officials in interviews with the researchers corroborated this information. They further indicated that the municipality suffered from chronic insufficiency of staff in performing several local government functions ranging from basic services to administrative responsibilities. A 'No' response to staff sufficiency was given for nearly all functions. In addition, a common response to the question, "What is the number of staff to be trained to execute the [relevant] functions", was almost always 'No', in relation to 28 functional areas. It was clear from the information collected that several functions required training and support for a number of staff. The financial management function particularly appeared to have suffered from past training neglect, and this urgently called for training in basic income and expenditure reporting. Another function that was in urgent need of training was technical services related to water and sanitation, given the municipality's new roles as water service authority and water service provider.

Close attention to addressing these issues would enable the municipality to work towards the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals aimed at poverty alleviation.

## **6. “Where the Rubber Hits the Tyre**

The main challenge for any system of local government that is functioning properly is to narrow the gap between policy formulation and implementation by facilitating the delivery of services. Only once this gap has been narrowed will the delivery of services reach the people who need these services the most — hence the commonly stated fact that local government is that part of the state that is essentially where the “rubber hits the tar”. Essentially, this means tangible projects such as the building and maintenance of schools, clinics and hospitals, sports and recreation facilities, and other infrastructure that people can identify with. In the absence of officials with relevant skills such as engineering, human resource management, electrical expertise, medical experience, etc. the running of local government becomes an extremely challenging if not downright impossible process in some instances. Problems such as lack of financial and project management skills, amalgamations of the former administrative structures, boundary demarcations, demographic representation, and crime have all added to the burden of the Nkomazi municipality. Project management is a very important skill in a municipality as it enables planners to evaluate, monitor and run projects successfully. Thus, if very few officials have such skills the municipality has to rely solely on outsiders such as consultants who might not

add value to the municipality but rather take advantage of its vulnerability. The amalgamations of the former Bantustan and other administrative structures have now been almost completed, but they created new tensions, conflict and opportunities for the municipal structures that were merged.

The municipality also faces challenges of demographic representation. While this study did not specifically focus on this issue, it was clear during the interaction of most officials that the top positions (especially scarce skills jobs) were still held by white males in the Nkomazi municipality. This will have to be addressed when issues of capacity are addressed, particularly in light of the new legislation and policies, e.g. the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, Employment Equity Act, White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service, that among other things govern issues of employment equity. Finally, crime was also mentioned during the study but it was not clear as to the extent of such crime in the running of the municipality. As the Nkomazi IDP (2003:62) states:

The Nkomazi area has a relatively low incidence of crime which is also a praiseworthy achievement if one considers the general poverty and unemployment prevalent in the area...Common crimes affecting the country are also prevalent in the Nkomazi area, such as burglaries, violence/assault and stock theft. From the public workshops, it appears that crimes against women (rape, assault, and abuse) are very prevalent but are not often reported and if they are, not properly investigated and/or pursued.

Clearly, the prevalence of such crimes within any municipality can adversely affect development, but in the case of Nkomazi it was not immediately apparent as to how far these affected capacity building specifically. The immediate problems for the municipality as indicated in the IDP (2003: 58) were:

- a. Small and limited budget allocation (the other bulk lies with the provincial department, thus addition to problems of bureaucracy and red tape).
- b. Land ownership
- c. Internal conflicts within the community
- d. Tensions between elected councillors and traditional leaders

All these four issues have directly and indirectly affected the capacity of the municipality to deliver quality public services and will have to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

## **7. Contradictions and Contestations**

What contradictions and contestations are there in the Nkomazi local municipality? We may begin by looking at human resources themselves. One contradiction in this municipality is that it comprises the relatively wealthy towns of Komatipoort, Malelane, Marloth Park, but it appears that there has not been much skills flow between these centres and the poorer, predominantly black settlements like Kamhlushwa. Thus, in line with national trends, it would appear that poverty still has a black (and most probably female) face — which threatens to undermine the government's efforts at redressing the historical imbalances between the different communities in the same municipal jurisdictions.



Competition of municipalities with other private and public sector institutions for scarce resources is also a dilemma and contradiction facing local government. Commenting on the debate on the Municipal Systems Bill at the National Assembly recently, Yunus Carrim, the Chairperson of the Provincial and Local Government Portfolio Committee acknowledged that, "Of course, to attract highly skilled, efficient managers, municipalities often have to compete with high private sector salaries. Often, municipalities most in need of highly skilled municipal managers are the smaller and rural municipalities who can least afford high salary packages in competition with the financially better-off municipalities" (Sabinet, [www.legilink.co.za](http://www.legilink.co.za)).

Poverty alleviation cannot be expected to succeed given inadequate capacity (or lack of it) of any municipality. This is particularly in line with the view that "sustainable poverty reduction requires economic growth" (Kayizzi-Mugerwa, 2003:113), although such growth requires effective and efficient municipalities if it is to benefit people at the grassroots levels. The work of staff and the local councillors in this regard is very important, but very often they are ill-prepared to execute their functions. It is only when multi-skilled officials are fully deployed in the different areas of their work that we could begin to see progress in terms of poverty alleviation, but in the case of Nkomazi municipality it would appear that this might take time.

## **8. Conclusion and recommendations**

We have to acknowledge that for most municipalities in South Africa it has not been a smooth ride to success. Through no fault of their own, they lack resources and infrastructure; but above all, they lack skilled people who can put the policy pronouncements into practice. This is where the major problem lies — at the level of human resource management. In some instances, the officials and councillors that are available are untrained and therefore often unsuitable for the tasks and demands of developmental local government; in others, there simply are no trained officials to do the job, i.e. what is commonly called lack of capacity. Hence the municipality usually relies on outside consultants to do certain jobs when it might have built its own capacity, especially to manage and monitor projects. However, the vicious circle in which these municipalities are often embroiled begins here, whereby some consultants take advantage of the situation and often offer advice and suggestions that are usually inappropriate and create problems for the municipality. In the case of South Africa's small rural local municipalities such as Nkomazi, problems like lack of capacity often threaten not only the stability of the municipality but also the foundation of democracy at the grassroots level.

What "lessons" if any, could we learn from the situation of the Nkomazi local municipality? First, we learn that human resources are very important ingredients of the local government menu. Second, we learn that local municipalities need the support of both provincial and central government on an on-going basis, and

not only when problems arise. Third, we have also learnt that there is a need for the training, especially joint training, of both the managerial or administrative officials and the elected councillors to inculcate in them a sense of mutual cooperation for the benefit of the municipality.

Finally, the municipal authorities (both political and administrative) must undertake studies or research looking at their past achievements and challenges. This more retrospective appraisal should also be compared with a future looking evaluation of unique municipal planning circumstances that will impact on planning.

In view of the above, the following recommendations are important:

- Need for more resources: financial, human and material, specifically in the HR component. More skilled staff should be hired, but the municipality will have to be cautious not to inflate its salary bill in the process.
- Need for further research on issues of capacity building for the municipality and other related matters.
- Need for training of both managerial officials and elected councillors of the municipality. This is essentially the responsibility of the Department of Provincial and Local Government. At the time of the research, there were plans by the department to conduct such training but it will have to include joint sessions for both the politicians and their administrative-managerial counterparts.

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