

Chronicles of a change Agent: Chronicle



The purpose of Chronicles of a Change Agent is to share the experiences of town planners and economic development practitioners working in the province of KZN to bring about change and development in municipal spaces. Many development practitioners in the province are suffering of what is known as 'development fatigue' whereby change agents have lost their enthusiasm for their work due to non-conducive working environments that hinder growth and professionalism.

This article is meant to share the experiences of these change agents, look at the solutions that the change agents feel need to be considered to bring about positive change and thereafter scribes notes to municipalities for considerations. Change agents have chosen to remain anonymous to prevent victimization in the workplace.

The end result of this project is for local government as a sector to be held accountable and to assess the distance that has been travelled, if there are stumbling blocks to practice, these should be removed, if there are areas that local government development is excelling in, these best practices should be shared, it is imperative that local government build integrity and accountability in the sector and deliver services to the communities they serve.

These chronicles have been collected by interviewing and documenting change agents. The following is a chronicle from a town planner based at a local municipality in KZN.

Experiences of a Change Agent

Nandi (pseudo name) works at a local municipality which is also a primary node for the district municipality. The municipality is mainly rural with 40 percent urban activities, the main economic activities in the municipality are agriculture, tourism and light industry.

When Nandi was appointed she assumed the role of Town Planner, which appeared to be a junior position from the advert, when she arrived at the municipality, she realised that the post was a management post, which required extensive skills in Environmental Services, Building Control, Housing and Geographical Information Systems. The post as it was, also required the town planner to undertake Land and Property Administration duties as the understanding in the municipality is that the Town planner manages all issues pertaining to land.

The post that Nandi occupied was also vacant for 2 years which meant there was a backlog of development applications that urgently required to be processed.

Currently there are no posts that have been filled i.e. Building Inspector, Environmental Officer, GIS Officer, and Town Planning Assistant/Technician, the only post that was filled was that of Housing Officer.

In the absence of other critical staff members, the Manager of the Planning, the role that Nandi currently serves in, is required to conduct all duties for these vacant posts. At the same time, the municipality is experiencing a high level of development whereby there are development applications and building plans for new buildings and proposed businesses in the area that are increasing.

Some of Nandi's daily duties include dealing with walk-ins from the community who enquire about applications for planning approval as well building plans, there are also telephonic enquiries, followed by email enquiries that need a response.

The town planning department in which Nandi is positioned, does not have a Planning administrator which means that all administrative duties are Nandi's responsibility. Thereafter, Nandi has management duties that need attention including attending MANCO meetings, supervising the Housing Officer for housing issues and the current Town Planning trainee, writing of items to present to the planning Portfolio Committee and ensuring that Town Planning project processes such as the Spatial Development Framework and Land Use Scheme review are attended to.

The municipality like other municipalities in the province is also in the midst of implementing the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA), which requires Nandi to perform the role of Authorized Officer, which implies that she has to conduct site inspections and write town planning reports for all applications that have been submitted for municipal approval.

Nandi is also required to assess, circulate and approve building plans, process outdoor advertising applications and conduct site inspections related to Building Control. Nandi reports directly to senior manager who is not a town planner, and due to this, Nandi is responsible for the overall planning related matters of the municipality, which includes spatial planning, land use management, land administration, building control, GIS, environmental management and human settlements.

Nandi expressed her concern with the above working arrangement and stated that local government does not have consideration for Development planning in their organizations or how they should function.

There is also no capacity to ensure service delivery and the appointments of key positions within the development planning directorate does not have consideration for the relevant skills and experience that is required to facilitate development planning.

Currently, Nandi is the only registered planner in the municipality and receives no planning support or direction from the management and relies on her planning peers from other municipalities and SALGA for assistance and guidance.

The management committee at the municipality lack town planning knowledge, which compromises the quality of decision making relating to planning and development. There is also no senior manager appointed to oversee the work of the planning and economic development domain. When Nandi attempted to make suggestions that could assist the directorate, her ideas were often dismissed for which Nandi thinks the reason is that she is female. The management committee lacks vision and understanding of town planning with no desire to want to learn, the net effect of this is a lack of service delivery or service delivery that is ill informed.

The municipality has no resources for development planning work to take place. There is no GIS system, no proper filing and registry system, no usable maps or cabinets for filing, the outdoor advertising bylaw has also not been gazetted and there is an outdated land use scheme.

Nandi states that the current municipal environment is not a conducive place for a professional and skilled person to work in due to an ill functioning administrative system that is compliance driven.

There is also limited budget allocated for development planning projects, the planning department does not receive support from the office of municipal manager in terms of prioritising the review of development plans.

Nandi states that her experience in local government has not been a great one due to lack of resources, lack of knowledge of town planning by the management and the politically charged environment that local government exists in. Nandi mentions that even when workshops and training sessions are scheduled for management and councillors there is poor attendance and lack of interest. Another contributing factor to the unfavourable working environment is that young planners are discouraged to see town planning management positions being occupied by political deployees who in some instances are not suitably qualified.

Possible solutions suggested by the change agent

The Change Agent Nandi suggests the following solutions to assist the situation in local government:

- A policy that will determine a standard salary for a registered planner regardless of the municipality that they work in, because the category of a municipality should not be the determinant of the worth of a planners acquired experience and qualifications;
- A policy that forces municipalities to only appoint registered and qualified planners and for SALGA & SACPLAN to determine those positions in all municipalities;
- A policy that states the basic salary for town planning graduates in all spheres of government to be the same;
- A policy that with force monitoring and functions of all town planning units in the municipalities.

municipalities can also employ technical registered planners and candidate planners.

- Municipalities must budget for the critical posts which include that of Building Plans Examiner, GIS Specialist and Planning Law Enforcement Officers to name a few.
- Municipalities must ensure that they have in place correct record keeping and archiving facilities
- Municipalities cannot rely on appointing one individual to undertake all planning related tasks at the municipality.
- Ward councillors and management of the municipality must be well capacitated in all planning related matters

What can municipalities learn from this chronicle

- Development Planning is a highly skilled discipline which requires the appointment of a qualified and professionally registered town planner,

