Local government develops technical scarce skills for road to professional registration

by Mvuleni Bukula, Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality

South Africa two decades into democracy has made significant progress in both economic and social development but continues to face difficult challenges with respect to providing a better quality of life for its people. The Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) has highlighted skills shortage and technical capacity (i.e. lack of engineers, technologists and artisans) as some of the problems that are hindering municipalities from delivering on infrastructure. This has led to the infrastructure deteriorating into a state of disrepair. Thus, central to the success of government’s 2030 vision will be to build and develop adequate technical capacity, in order for local government to deliver and maintain world class infrastructure service delivery.

To address the above, National Treasury has introduced a new grant for municipalities with the objective of building and improving their technical and management abilities in the delivery of infrastructure. The grant is aligned to the national outcomes and is designed in such a way that it supports Outcome 5 “A skilled and capable workforce to support an inclusive growth path”, and Outcome 9 “A responsive, accountable, effective and efficient government system” [1].

It is one of the strategic support interventions and also a sustainable solution to shift from gap filling practices and curb the shortage of competent and capable, skilled professionals in the built environment. This grant aims at supporting the government drive to encourage municipalities to engage in processes of reforming the built environment, utilising the funding and other investments and the creation of jobs for newly qualified graduates. This is a schedule six grant, known as the Infrastructure Skills Development Grant (ISDG), and its main purpose is to train technicians, technologists and engineers in the built environment until they become professionally registered with recognised professional bodies/councils.

**Background**

In 2011, the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality (NMBM) requested funding from National Treasury for the expansion of the Electricity and Energy Directorates skills development programme and full implementation of the grant commenced in January 2013. The NMBM is amongst the first grant recipients to implement the ISDG Mentorship Programme in the Eastern Cape Province.

The roll-out of the ISDG Mentorship Programme in the Eastern Cape necessitated the establishment of a programme management support office in the province. The NMBM, considered to be the forerunner, was requested to also provide strategic support to other local municipalities and a decision was taken to have the programme management support based at NMBM.

To date, the programme has yielded profound results at NMBM, particularly in providing the necessary capacity in areas of scarce skills. The programme has recruited 22 unemployed graduates in the following professions: electrical technicians, construction project managers, geographical information science technologists; and have 21 civil technician bursars, some of which have been with the municipality for just under four years.

**Table 1: Details regarding the Eastern Cape ISDG Skills Matrix.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technicians</td>
<td>Technologist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering field</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrical engineering</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil engineering</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental sciences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GIS</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantity surveyor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project and construction management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction project management</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction health and safety officer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property valuations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property valuer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town planning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artisan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrician</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Millwright</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plumber</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Service Delivery Budget Implementation Plan (SDBIP) for the next Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) period commencing in 2014/15. This has been done in order to monitor successes and any arising challenges of the municipality’s strategic level, and to ensure that National Treasury’s performance indicators are adhered to. The ISDG Mentorship Programme has three critical conditions attached to it:

- The training, mentoring and coaching must be provided by accredited service providers and registered professionals in the built environment; the training programmes should be developed by the host municipality approved by the relevant professional body.
- On commencement of their training, it is required that these graduates register as “candidates” with the relevant professional body so that they are professionally registered on completion.
- The training programme is overseen by professionally registered mentors and coaches in that respective profession and the professional body will assist with the quality assurance thereof [2].

The ISDG Mentorship Programme is guided and supported by a steering committee that is composed of statutory council and sector departments. Municipalities gain access to additional professional workforce and thus enhance productivity and efficiency while the graduates augment their qualifications with theory and practical experience. During training, municipalities must follow structured training programmes that meet the requirements of the relevant statutory councils. Upon completion of the training programme and when graduates are successfully registered as professionals within their respective fields, municipalities are expected to absorb them within their respective fields. Municipalities are expected to capitalise on the skills that have been developed [1].

**Eastern Cape ISDG skills matrix**

Details regarding the Eastern Cape ISDG skills matrix can be seen in Table 1.

**Achievements**

The ISDG Mentorship Programme has been in operation in the Eastern Cape Province for 18 months now, and as a result, the programme deliverables have advanced to the operationalisation and monitoring of the project implementation. The main focus is currently on providing learner guidance, support and ensuring that workplace training provides opportunities to gain competence through evaluation, consultation and implementation of work. The following activities have ensured that the practical training and professional development of mentees meet the stipulated competencies and standards set by the relevant applicable statutory bodies/councils:

- Established strategic partnership as Eastern Cape municipalities – complementing each municipality’s strengths.
- Development of framework to manage multi-professional trainees in the municipality environment.
- Approval of training programme by professional bodies/statutory councils within the profession specific clusters/workstreams established.
- Incorporation of ISDG Mentorship Programme to IDPs, performance indicators and workplace skills plans (WSP) of the municipalities.
- Training programme is aligned to suitability of training environment and existing projects.
- Training management is centrally co-ordinated for leveraging maximum technical input from different municipalities.
- Quality assurance is done prior to rotating to the next area of training – assessments, ECSA C2.1 form, C2.3 training and experience report form, report, etc.
- Governance structures in place for monitoring and reporting.
- Established strategic relationship with external partners – Eskom, Department of Public Works (DPW), Department of Rural Development and Land Reform, etc.
- Appointment of mentors for all trainees.
- Behavioural assessments for addressing non-technical training competencies and life skills.

**Programme successes**

**Programme management support**

The programme support team’s presence, across municipalities has assisted them in laying the foundation for the programme, understand the municipality’s culture and policies, and ensure that the programme is fully entrenched, amongst other things.

**Project governance**

The management framework used for implementation ensures that municipalities adhere to grant conditions.

**Development of accelerated training programme**

Strategic partnerships with professional bodies have ensured standardisation of all training programmes, allowing for seamless integration as per stipulated competencies and standards set.

**Strategic partners**

Workplace experience is provided by strategic partners who provide suitable training options to meet the stipulated competencies and standards set by statutory bodies.

**Inter-municipality memorandum of understanding**

In the Eastern Cape Province, Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality, Lukhanji District Municipality and Buffalo City Municipality were amongst the first municipalities to be recipients of the funding for the ISDG Mentorship Programme. The grant was subsequently also granted to

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**Risks**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risks</th>
<th>Mitigation measures</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SACPCMP requires trainees to have three years post graduate relevant practical experience for candidate registration meaning they won’t be eligible to register as professionals within the funding period.</td>
<td>A meeting was held with the registration council on 28 March 2014 where SACPCMP agreed to assist in formulating a plan to ensure that the candidates upgrade to professional categories within the specified funding period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some of the SACPCMP trainees do not have a B-Tech Degree as required by the council.</td>
<td>Mentees to fund their own B-Tech studies so that they can acquire the qualification and be eligible to register with the council.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional registration through ECSA requires mentees to submit a project for which they were responsible for from start to finish. Selection and availability of such projects could pose a challenge.</td>
<td>The mentors have sent correspondence to the respective departments in order to identify such projects for mentees where possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training is expensive if individually done and where it involves travel and accommodation.</td>
<td>Training is centrally co-ordinated to cater for all ISDG municipality beneficiaries in the Eastern Cape for cost saving and added value.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supply chain processes are cumbersome and take a much longer time to procure.</td>
<td>Sharing of resources amongst municipalities and upfront procurement of training linked to the training plan. An inter-municipal agreement to formalise collaborations amongst Eastern Cape municipalities which are recipients of the ISDG was adopted and signed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Details of the project challenges and remedial actions.
King Sabata Dalindyebo District Municipality and Alfred Nzo District Municipality.

Whilst operating their separate programmes, the municipalities noticed that within their programmes they had weaknesses which prevented them from fully performing their obligations and that amongst them, some municipalities were stronger in areas they had weaknesses.

An agreement to formalise collaborations amongst Eastern Cape municipalities to share and utilise each other’s skills and resources was concluded in August 2014.

Behavioural assessments for non-technical training

Engineers play an important role in a nation’s development. In the new millennium, engineers have to face new challenges, which require more than just technical skills. They are expected to be more versatile and possess essential non-technical skills as their work scope will require them to deal with professionals in various disciplines. In addressing this issue of skills mismatch between the graduates produced by institutions of higher learning and the requirements of industry, the NMBM has incorporated behavioural assessments for all graduates as part of its implementation strategy for the ISDG. A competency framework for each profession in line with the provincial and local government’s occupational competency framework and data dictionary was developed to provide a personal development plan which will assist each graduate in their training for the duration of the mentorship programme.

The behavioural assessments highlighted the following glaring challenges:

- 24% of students functioning below diploma level.
- 15% learning potential also below diploma level.
- 36% below average emotional intelligence.
- 24% below average English verbal reasoning.
- 42% below numeric reasoning.
- 39% below average abstract reasoning.

In an attempt to address these challenges, the following development actions have been incorporated in the implementation of the ISDG Mentorship Programme:

- Formal development actions:
  - Team development intervention to bind, motivate and inspire as well as develop teamwork and team facilitation skills.
  - Emotional Intelligence Intervention (workshop).
- Business communication skills e.g. presentation skills, meetings and minute taking, business writing skills etc.
- Informal development actions:
  - Coaching focusing on communication skills.
  - Coaching focusing on organisational commitment and compliance.

Project challenges and remedial actions

Details of the project challenges and remedial actions can be seen in Table 2.

Key programme considerations

- Incorporating existing permanent employees.
- Minimising duplication of effort in government.
- Deep consideration of the training environment – design/construction/maintenance.
- Formalising the strategic partnerships.
- Professional bodies to be more aggressive in quality assurance.
- Streamlining various training interventions.
- Skills retention strategy – train for country or train to retain.

Lessons learnt

The variety of skills in the programme necessitated the engagement with the respective professional bodies/councils and the packaging of different rules for each due to the nature and complexity involved. This includes finding alternative employment in areas where the municipalities have a challenging environment in doing so.

There are about 32% of the trainees in the ISDG Mentorship Programme who are not hosted in their respective municipalities as these environments will not be able to give sufficient training exposure in preparation for professional registration. They are placed with relevant host employers and this requires close monitoring as there are also challenges in streamlining what they are doing there to the programme deliverables.

The timing of the programme is relevant and the need to provide trained and registered professionals is enormous. Professionalising local government requires a concerted effort and commitment from government, relevant entities, professional bodies and the private sector. The results of skills development can only be realised in the medium to long term, i.e. after the graduates have satisfied the requirements of the relevant professional body.

Unlike other internship programmes, not every municipality has the capacity to host and it becomes necessary to strike partnerships with other public entities to support training.

Host municipalities and entities have a better understanding of training requirements recognised by professional bodies in the built environment.

The programme has to be aligned to other capacity building programmes in local government, such as those programmes driven by bodies like the Municipal Infrastructure Support Agency (MISA) and Local Government Sector Education and Training (LGSETA). This is to ensure that there is no duplication of effort for municipal buy-in and accountability thereof.

Conclusion

Factors that are key for the successful implementation of the ISDG Mentorship Programme are: sound principles, credible data, political commitment, adequate capacity (human, institutional and organisational), adequate and effective monitoring and evaluation, unambiguous assessment criteria and common understanding of goals, targets and indicators.

The roll-out of the ISDG Mentorship Programme has had a tangible and positive impact on accountability, spending and service delivery within local government, and the experience gained and capacity created has developed a solid foundation for impact driven and aligned capacity building.

Acknowledgements

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- Project Management Office
- Eastern Cape municipalities that participated in the programme, namely: Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality, Lukhanji District Municipality, Buffalo City Metro Municipality, King Sabata Dalindyebo District Municipality and Alfred Nzo District Municipality.
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References


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