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EASTERN CAPE
COOPERATIVE GOVERNANCE
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COGTA *Newsletter*

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MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!!



Ms Charity Sihunu



Mr Basil Mase

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Interview with Mr Mase who was sent to Amahlathi Local Municipality (ALM) as part of the Municipal Support Intervention led by the Executive Council of the Eastern Cape Province, under Section 139 (1) of the Constitution. Mr Mase is the Chief Directorate for Strategic Management, Communication and Information Services. Below he shares his experiences as the Administrator of ALM.

Question 1: The Executive Council requested you to provide support to ALM. What were the main issues in the Terms of Reference (ToR)?

Answer: I was appointed to be the Head of Administration and the Accounting Officer of the municipality to ensure its stability and smooth running. The ToRs further detailed specific areas that needed to be attended to as a matter of urgency as follows:

- Facilitate the appointment of the MM.
- Monitor the implementation of a Turn Around Plan (TAP) for the financial situation of the municipality.
- Provide guidance to the Municipal Council in compliance to all applicable laws, and
- Ensure the implementation of Council resolutions.

Question 2: What was your initial reaction when Cogta MEC approached you with the request?

Answer: I was a bit taken aback as the municipality was all over the news for bad reasons. It was reported that they would go for months without employees being paid salaries. They were in court with the former MM who was on suspension at the time.

Question 3: Did you have any fears or concerns about your job at hand? Please elaborate.

Answer: Very much. Employees had not been paid salaries for the months of May and June 2022. There were talks about the re-deployment of the Mayor to Amathole District Municipality. Therefore, there was uncertainty in Council.

Question: How did you overcome your fears and concerns?

Answer: When the first tranche of the financial year was received in July, I had to facilitate payment of salaries for two months (May & June). I further advised Council to apply for an overdraft from the bank which Council agreed to. This was necessary to allow the municipality to service its creditors.

Question: What did you observe in your first week in the municipality?

Answer: The staff were demoralised and lost hope that the municipality would recover from its position. There was uncertainty in Council due to the discussions within the ruling party that the Mayor was to be re-deployed.

Question: How was the atmosphere? Was the environment welcoming to a 'stranger'?

Answer: The atmosphere was very tense, and employees were not trusting that the support by COGTA would bear any fruits. They were arguing that COGTA sent two Administrators before me, and they did not see any change. They were just not trusting that our support would help them.

Question: What were the main sticking points?

Answer: Non-payment of salaries for about three months in a year. Other issues were;

- The (court) case launched by Council to review the standardisation of salaries for municipal staff.
- Poor servicing of the Eskom debt.
- Closure of the traffic department which is a source of revenue.
- Most vehicles were not functional which made it difficult for employees to do (their) work.
- Shortage of petrol/diesel for municipal vehicles.

Question: What have you achieved?

Answer: Facilitated the resolution of the matter between the former MM and Council through engagement out of court until a decision for a settlement was reached.

- Engaged the provincial department of Transport to make payment arrangements for what the municipality owed.
- Re-opening of the traffic offices in Stutterheim and Cathcart.
- Recruitment of the MM, CFO, Directors of Planning and Development, Community Services and Engineering and Infrastructure.
- Coordinated the submission of Annual Financial Statements to Auditor-General.
- Collation and submission of the Annual and quarterly reports.

Question: What are your impressions about the communication system between the municipal leadership and its key stakeholders (ratepayers, business, Community Based Organisations, etc)

Answer: This is an area that requires improvement. It is very common that when communities are not satisfied about the services they receive, they just march and burn buildings hence the blockage of the N6 road is so common. There is no Public Participation Strategy in the municipality. An improvement is needed in the petitions management system.

Question: What has CoGTA planned to sustain the intervention which you were part of?

Answer: That is an area of weakness with the department in that after an intervention there are no after care programmes to sustain the achievements made during the period of support.

Question: What oversight role does CoGTA play to monitor and evaluate the functioning of Amahlathi municipality after it reached a crisis situation stage.

Answer: There is no well-structured approach of monitoring municipalities in distress and especially those that we gave intensive support. There is a need to monitor the performance of the municipality on specific areas lifted in the close-up report. Knowing that the municipality is heavily indebted to Eskom, there is a need to monitor whether it is servicing this debt or not.

Question: Any lessons, you have learnt?

Answer: There is a need to assist municipalities to develop public participation mechanism that would create (clear) channels of communication between the municipality and residents. The following areas also require urgent attention, viz;

- Assist municipalities on the management of petitions.
- Monitor and train Ward Committees to perform their functions.
- Make War Rooms functional as places of engaging communities directly about their (service delivery) issues.
- Monitor the salaries paid to municipal staff and ensure that they are paid according to the job evaluation.
- Assist the municipality to comply with the SPLUMA.

Question: What is your message to the leadership of Amahlathi LM?

Answer:

- Stay focused and support those given responsibility to lead.
- Create platforms to communicate with residents and community organisations.
- Do not involve employees on political conflicts that are common among Councillors (as) elected representatives.
- Closely monitor municipal finances and be ready to engage residents to encourage them to pay for municipal services.



Ms Sihunu, Chief Director for Municipal Governance and Support was seconded to the Blue Crane Local Municipality (BCLM) as part of COGTA support to Municipalities, on her return she shares her experiences

Question: You were requested to provide support to BCLM. What were the main issues in the Terms of Reference (ToR)?

Answer: The secondment to the municipality was per the department's mandate which was basically providing its Section 154 support to the municipality. The municipality had a vacancy of a Municipal Manager (MM) and unfortunately at the time none of the Senior Managers were the best one to act in the vacant position and thus the Municipal Council resolved to request the department to second someone to act. The ToR were as follows, to:

- Facilitate the appointment of the MM.
- Ensure the implementation of Council Resolutions, and
- Provide guidance to the Council in compliance to all applicable laws.

Question: What was your initial reaction when Cogta MEC approached you with the request?

Answer: At first, I felt a bit uncertain and scared as this was going to be my first assignment of this nature. It is a fact that at some point we were seconded as a team of three officials by the department to support to Mr Themba Hani who was the Acting MM at Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality. My task was going to be a different ball game altogether as I was now going to be the Accounting Officer (AO). Whilst one was confronted with such fear, one at the same time also felt grateful that the management of the department was giving me an opportunity to grow and have first-hand experience of the municipal environment. What was comforting was that Blue Crane was at least not a very big municipality which was a good starting point.

Question: Did you have any fears or concerns about your job at hand? Please elaborate.

Answer: Yes, as indicated above, there were fears, it is always part of human nature to fear the unknown. As a concern was the fear of making mistakes or rather doing things that could damage the image of the department.

Question: If any, how did you overcome those concerns?

Answer: Firstly, I knew that without any doubt, the management of the department would be available to guide and support me with their wealth of experience in local government. I am talking about the likes of the HoD Fani, DDG Mlokothe, Chief Director

Mase and Director Pinyana. This gave me comfort in knowing that time and again I would seek their advice on complex matters that I had to deal with.

What also eased me was the good intentions of our department especially the Developmental Local Government (DLG) Branch to build the capacity of its own officials to understand the municipal environment. Lastly, I work closely with Mr. Maqungo, the Director for Legal Services and they have been giving us legal support.

Question: What did you observe in your first week in the Municipality?

Answer: I observed that irrespective of the size of a municipality, the matters they must deal with on daily basis are as challenging and complex like in any other bigger municipality.

Question: How was the atmosphere? Was the environment welcoming to a 'stranger'?

Answer: The environment was kind of a mixed one, welcoming and not well receptive. The general staff, Senior Managers and Councillors were welcoming and focused on supportive of every action taken for the good of the institution.

The situation was kind of different with the other stakeholders. On my very first day, I confronted a challenge of the Small Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) that were protesting, causing chaos in the municipality by chasing employees out of their offices and literally demanded an immediate meeting with me. I was forced to attend them and held up for the better part of the day amid demands and threats for instant responses. This kind of experience was not a welcoming one and that amounted to a baptism of fire.

In two days, I had another encounter with the Farmer's Association with a list of complaints against the municipality which they alleged were not responded to. These related to poor electricity provision. In a nutshell the environment was just not a good one with complaints from key stakeholder of the municipality.

Question: What were the main sticking points?

Answer: The main sticking points related to the provision of water, sanitation and electricity. It must be noted that this municipality is a Water Services Authority (WSA) and a Water Services Provider (WSP) with old and dilapidated infrastructure. Pearston town for instance gets its water from Boreholes. The provision of water daily is such a huge challenge due to lack of enough capacity of water reservoirs and old infrastructure on the Water Treatment Works. The old infrastructure leads to common sewer spillages and no water supply. The aged electricity network is another challenge that leads to frequent electricity outages thus affecting water pumps, daily.

Hastily, I must state that the department within two weeks of my arrival, on request, we made available a water tank to distribute water to communities to mitigate water outages as loadshedding was also causing havoc. We boast about this as victory that as a departmental secondee I delivered on.

Question: What progress have you made in Blue Crane LM?

Answer: On my arrival beginning of November 2022, spending on Municipal Infrastructure Grants (MIG) was low. I realised that the Bid Committees were not sitting thus affecting procurement. I then encouraged all Committees to sit on weekly basis and any member who missed a meeting was expected to account. This initiative contributed positively to the extent that by end December the municipality managed to reach 46% expenditure. I also introduced weekly Management meetings which was not a culture in the institution and that assisted to hold managers accountable for the performance of their departments.

There was also disjuncture between the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) and the Service Delivery and Budget Implementation Plan (SDBIP). Through a collective effort, good work was done to align these documents and an adjustment done to the Capital budget as it was affected by the non-approval of the roll over application to the tune of R7,2 million.

Question: What are your impressions about the communication system between the municipal leadership and its key stakeholders (ratepayers, business, Community Based Organisations, etc)

Answer: There is poor communication with stakeholders and that has led to a trust deficit between the municipality and its stakeholders. Through the office of the Speaker and Corporate Services, we started communicating basic issues like alerting the public about water outages. In my close out engagement with the Mayor I raised this matter as something that the municipality should attend to.

Question: What has CoGTA planned to sustain the intervention which you were part of?

Answer: Through the Municipal Support and Intervention Plan (MSIP) that has been developed by the department, there will be continued monitoring with other Sector departments. For instance, the Municipality is currently confronted with the challenge of not maintaining its level of the Green Drop Status. We will provide legal support towards the formation of a public-private partnership for alternative energy generation.

Question: What oversight role does CoGTA play to monitor and evaluate the functioning of municipality after they reach a crisis stage.

Answer: CoGTA through the implementation of the Municipal Support Implementation Framework (MSIF) plays its oversight role by periodically assessing the status of the municipality and tailor make support. This is continuously done to avoid a crisis. It must be understood that the municipality has not reached a crisis stage, there is relevant stability. My secondment was not on the basis of a crisis, rather to fastrack the recruitment process of the MM and the Director Community Services.

Question: Any lessons, you have learnt?

Answer: Yes. The department needs to employ more officials with technical skills like planners; engineers; etc to assist municipalities especially the smaller and struggling municipalities.

Other challenges in municipalities might not necessarily require hands on support but some form of a shift in the funding model. We should therefore as it has been done before, continue to make submissions to the Financial and Fiscal Commission (FFC) to influence change in the funding model of municipalities. The status quo will never able municipalities to address the infrastructure challenges that they are experiencing.

Question: What is your message to the leadership of Blue Crane LM?

Answer: My observation is that the political leadership has the interest of the municipality at heart and are committed to play their oversight role. I encourage them to continue to do so. The capacity of Councillors who serve in the Municipal Public Accounts Committee (MPAC) is a cause for concern hence political parties should seriously consider deploying different people to this committee.

The administrative arm is equally committed but has a weakness of not being firm in holding their junior officials accountable. Managers must implement Staff Regulations for officials below Section 56 so that performance management is implemented and there should be consequences for any wrong doing.



Mr Vuyani Sibene, the Assistant Director in the Directorate of Corporate Communication grafted the questions and conducted the interviews.