

Grahamstown's development goals

Written by Geraldine Kent
Wednesday, 20 April 2011 12:34

My friend, Lauren van der Vyver recently wrote an article about development and sustainability for [Grocotts Online](#) .

“A bold plan to create new business hubs in Grahamstown's townships was announced at a Mayoral Business Forum meeting at the Graham Hotel recently.

The Township Regeneration Strategy (TRS), which will be driven by Port Elizabeth-based town and regional planners Metroplan, in association with Makana Municipality, aims to create clusters of sustainable businesses and public facilities in seven new activity spheres.”

I read this introduction and was fascinated by this concept. Sounds great doesn't it? I thought so too. But then I took a moment to pause and actually analyse the plan, the proposed implementation and the possibility of success.

In theory it sounds like a good way to offer the community shops, clinics, schools and recreational areas that are “in walking distance”. But in order for these ‘nodes’ to be adequately useful, a lot will need to be done in terms of the existing infrastructure.

According to the Township Restructuring Strategy (TRS) the following will be implemented: pedestrian-friendly streets, recycling derelict buildings into businesses and greening the city through lighting and the planting of trees. Access to the new business areas would be improved by upgrading township roads to improve mobility and access to public transport, creating “activity” streets.

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Is there any way to guarantee that these promises will be carried out sufficiently? Residents in Joza have complained about their roads being in such bad condition that in medical emergencies, ambulances have not been able to reach them in a timely way. It's not that I'm being pessimistic about the opportunities that such a project could bring to the community. It's just that realistically speaking, Makana Municipality, has failed to deliver to their people in the past, what makes this any different?

For a moment though, let us envision the success of this project and what that could mean for other projects aimed at development and sustainability.

If this plan were able to offer schools, clinics, shopping centres, and parks, a lot could be done in terms of making the township a sustainable area. And with sustainability comes the prospect of further development. In terms of that being relative to technology and digital media, I will consider the education sector as an example.

Without proper education, it is difficult to ensure that children of tomorrow will finish secondary school, go on to tertiary institutions, or a stable job and have the chance to build a promising life for themselves. In order for their education to be on an equal level to children at more privileged schools, access to ICT classes and literature is vital.

I recently did a story on the lack of ICT services in Joza township and found out that the only high school with a proper IT classroom and an internet connection is Nombolelo High School. At first that was a relief – it seemed as though the government had realised the necessity of supplying schools with an IT-literate teacher, sufficient bandwidth and computers.

However, this was not the case. The government had not supplied nearly enough desktop computers for the number of pupils in each class; they also had not provided any bandwidth for the school to use. The school's internet is being supplied by Rhodes University, but even that has a major limitation to how much is being supplied.

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The problem that this situation creates is as follows – the children that go to these township schools, because their parents can't afford anything else, do not get the same education in terms of ICT literacy... leaving them unable to adequately make use of the resources online for school projects, unable to look for education or employment opportunities online, unable to stay on track with digital developments that they may face in the world after schooling.

They have not been given the chance to develop and change with the movements of web 2.0 and so, even if they do find a job it is likely that may not be able to adequately apply themselves as a digitally-orientated employee, which is a grievous disadvantage. The longer these children are kept in the dark, the longer they remain uneducated in the ICT sector, the longer they lose out on job opportunities, the longer they remain unemployed – perpetuating the cycle of poverty as a result of lack of education in South Africa.

I am relieved to see that there are plans to make the townships sustainable in their own location, with their own businesses. But these new opportunities are not going to be able to remain sustainable because the existing infrastructure is severely lacking. It is naive not to realise that in today's market – you have to be digitally connected and literate in order to compete with the rest of the market. So instead of building on top of a crumbling structure, let's take the strategies and the money back to the basics – let's educate the children already in school, let's give them the opportunities that their parents never had, so that they can develop their township in their own ways, with their own knowledge and their own business plans.

Spending money in the wrong ways never ends up being successful. So don't implement the TRS *for* the residents of Joza, Makana Municipality, give them the tools to do so *themselves*.

Development is a GREAT idea! Sustainability is another GREAT idea. But first you need to deliver to your people and give them the tools and knowledge to compete with and survive in the digital world for themselves!