



Report:

Changemaker Towns Network Launch

02 March 2022

The launch event for Changemaker Towns Network was held online, convened by the [Western Cape Economic Development Partnership](#), in collaboration with the [In Transformation Initiative](#). A diverse group of over 70 people from across South Africa joined, including changemakers from local partnerships, CEOs, researchers, mayors, and residents.

Highlights included

- 'Fireside' storytelling by changemakers and local partnerships from Cederberg, Makhanda, Greyton and Sundays River Valley
- Offers of support from government officials and businesses alike
- An overview of the [Small Towns Regeneration Strategy, recently launched by the Department of Cooperative Governance](#).

A [recording of the full session to YouTube](#) is online for those who missed it.

The whole of society approach - where government is a key player but not the only player - was emphasised by various participants, along with an emphasis on what is strong, as opposed to what is wrong. Encouragingly, the 'offers' of support or resources expressed by participants far outnumbered the 'needs'. One support organisation offered "funding, governance and stakeholder engagement lessons, links with big metros and other spheres of government, models of participatory economic development, data and tested concepts". Exciting stuff!

[Have a look at the offers & needs database](#) which will be kept updated, for offers you can make use of, or a need you can fulfil.

The next Changemakers Towns Network session will be convened by June 2022, but we plan to have smaller engagements and more focused activities before then.

Please take two minutes to [give us feedback](#) on the launch – just three easy questions that will help guide where we can take this Network together!

The Connections Carnival, planned for later this year, aims to catalyse changemaking and partnerships using mini-parades, fetes, and other small events in six to 12 towns around South Africa. If your organisation would like to receive funding to be a part of this, [find out more here](#).

Lastly, let us know if we should invite anyone else to the Network, and please keep in touch with us at the EDP via [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#). The remainder of this report covers the launch session in more depth.

1) Welcome and introduction

Participants ‘entered’ the meeting to the strains of Ladysmith Black Mambazo and Jeremy Loops’ [This Town](#), which set the tone of the dire situation many small and medium-sized town residents find themselves in, but also the potential for change through collaboration. EDP Programme Lead Simon Mayson invited participants to submit one word that summarised why they had joined, and a word cloud was generated.



Word poll highlighting participants’ desired outcomes for the launch

Intentions of the Network

After EDP Programme Assistant Zaakirah Braaf took participants through the proposed Rules of Engagement, CEO Andrew Boraine introduced the intentions of the Network (see [full introduction here](#)). He identified five groups within the Network, to collaborate for change:

1. **Active citizens**, including community and civil society organisations, local and regional business, tourism bodies
2. **Municipalities and government policymakers** (CoGTA – Small Towns Regeneration Strategy, Intermediary Cities Municipal Programme) and SALGA Karoo Small Town Initiative and Municipal Investment Directory

3. **Researchers and academics** focusing on demographic, socio-economic, environmental and governance trends in towns and regions (HSRC, CSIR, Public Affairs Research Institute, Small Towns Research Unit, US, African Centre for Cities, UCT, Centre for Development support and Sarchi Chair on Urban-Region Economies, UFS)
4. **Support organisations** (Siyabuya Movement, Foundations, Development Partners, Citeplan Urban Development Consulting), other networks, donors supporting initiatives in towns
5. **Amplifiers:** the inspirers, innovators, communicators, facilitators, mediators, and intermediaries.

Andrew went on to acknowledge several key partners, including Roelf Meyer, Mohammed Bhabha and Prof Nick Binedell from In Transformation Initiative, and Exec Mayor Ruben Richards from the Cederberg Municipality, and welcomed additional partners to support the Network.

2) Fireside storytelling: four groups

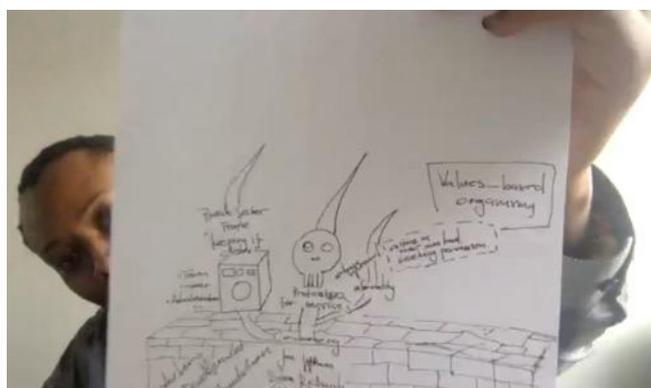
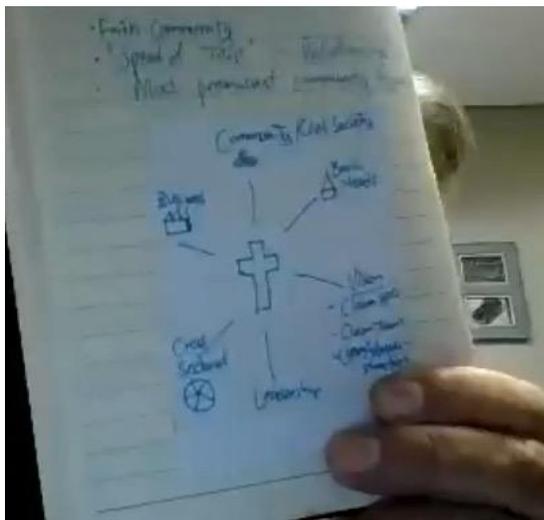
Participants then broke away into four groups, led by EDP facilitators, with changemakers from two towns in the Western Cape and two in the Eastern Cape shared stories of how partnering led to action. Listeners ‘around the fire’ were encouraged to draw what they heard or were inspired by and share it with the group.

Cederberg Development Foundation/ Cederberg Municipality, Western Cape

Storytellers: Mayor Ruben Richards from Cederberg Municipality and Jan Oosthuizen from Cederberg Development Foundation

Facilitator: Andrew Boraine

In the Cederberg, growing collaboration between citizens and local government has resulted in a local partnership, now called Cederberg Development Foundation, which acts as an intermediary, easing tensions, including between political partners. Mayor Ruben Richards, elected in 2021, came out of this partnership and ran as an independent candidate in last year’s local elections. A key lesson was that a shared vision is useful, but joint action, and setting the vision into action was most important, with a focus on getting the basics right: clean water, clean town, and an effective municipal administration.



Jacques Blaauw and Sekoetlane Phamodi share their winning visual contributions depicting the story

Sundays River Valley Collaborative, Eastern Cape

Storytellers: Deon Pretorius from Sundays River Valley Collaborative & Development Partners

Facilitator: Simon Mayson

Over the last three years, a slow but steady facilitated change process [has been enabled in Sundays River Valley \(SRV\)](#), overcoming conflict, and increasing collaboration across deep-seated historical divides, towards common development goals.

Deon reflected on three potential reasons why the SRV is making progress:

- 1) Changes in relationships among leaders and stakeholder groups
- 2) Solutions emerged as relationships altered over time. This process of time was essential to the process and must be respected and understood
- 3) There was no attempt to side-step local government or to form some type of parallel local government.

This meant that legal action by farmers was avoided, and tension was resolved outside of the courts. Instead, Deon proposed the using this '[local social compact](#)' to guide a multisectoral approach.



Zodidi Meyiswa of SALGA shows her depiction of the Sundays River Valley Collaborative story

Makhanda Circle of Unity, Eastern Cape

Storytellers: Sakhe Ntlabezo from Rhodes University and Paul Smith from Kagiso Trust.

Facilitator: Brian Adams

The Circle of Unity initiative was initiated in Makhanda in response to the significant polarisation of key stakeholders in the town. The image of a circular firing squad was used to symbolise this: everyone was doing their own thing, and collectively shooting each other down.

The initiative quickly realised they needed to work against this first before any progress could be made.

Recognising the importance of building relationships and gaining each other's trust, the first undertaking by the Circle was a deep dive with stakeholders, in which to build trust. The central idea of the Circle of Unity is that collaboration is the key catalyst to creating change or improvement. One example which saw direct action from this saw the education cluster initiating a vaccines programme for local schools, within minutes of the idea being launched at an online meeting.



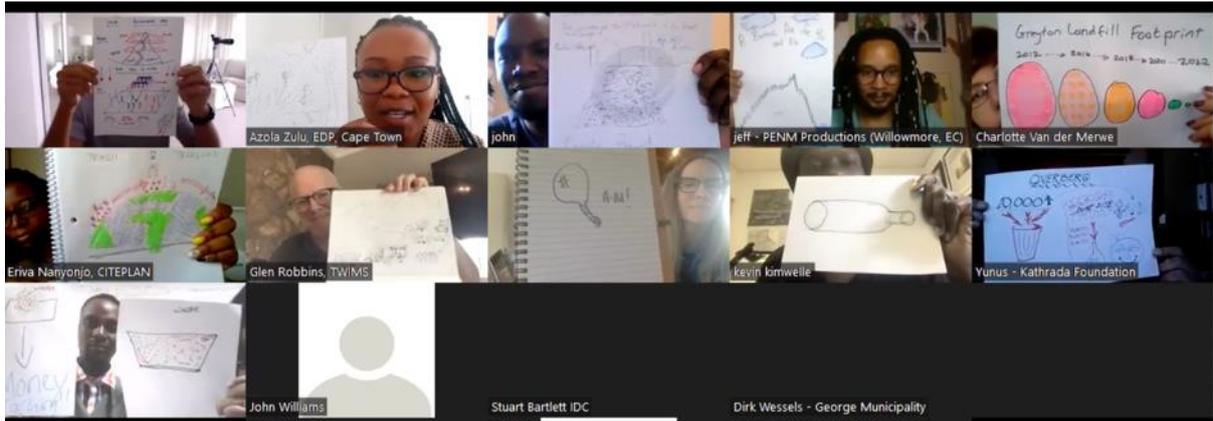
*Left: The depiction of the contested space within which the Circle of Unity Launched.
Right: A rapid visual depiction of Makhanda's Circle of Unity process showing the value of circular engagements, by participant Mariapaola McGurk*



Various other depictions of the Circle of Unity story, by people sitting round the 'fire'

Greyton Transition Town, Western Cape

Greyton town in the Overberg faced an overloaded dumpsite which was running out of space. Greyton Transition Town initiative held a festival to create environmental awareness around waste management and support a community-driven approach. The wasteland was reimagined into a festival and a market where people got to sell and barter items, see their waste first-hand, and tackle the causes of environmental impact of the waste at the same time.



The 'artists' inspired by the Greyton storytelling group.

3) Plenary with storytellers

After the storytelling, participants joined again in plenary, with highlighted comments as follows:

- Stories help to build trust by giving everyone the complete picture. This allows trust to take root and builds the foundation for people to work together. If you do not feel understood you do not want to work with someone - **Doug Reeler, Greyton Transition Town.**
- The ChangemakersHub in Clanwilliam and around South Africa uses storytelling to promote the work other non-profit is doing, giving them a voice - **Michelle Korevaar, ChangemakersHub.**
- We get so caught up in the process of the project and its outputs that we lose the opportunity to explain collaboration. Patience is needed to transform our communities and to achieve good outcomes within local communities. We must recognise the governance that is needed., as well as economic opportunities. What kind of economic development is needed? - **Shabari Shaily-Gerber, British High Commission.**
- Thankful to be part of this group. Storytelling that we communicate in a way people are willing to listen - **Zaid Omer, Western Cape Government.**
- It's important to get more people involved in enabling the Small-Town Regeneration Strategy, and partner to ensure the growth of small towns - **Zodidi Meyiswa, SALGA.**
- Collaboration is key. Do not be despondent if it is not adopted. With collaboration you will get push back from other institutions, but it's worth it - **Paul Smith, Kagiso Trust.**

4) In conversation with: Sekoetlane Phamodi, Country Director, Accountability Lab, South Africa

What is Accountability Lab, in 20 seconds?

Accountability Lab is a social change organisation that does public sector work, where the core emphasis is to see it through a positive deviance lens. As opposed to naming and shaming how bad things are and naming what is so bad about our society, we try to organise around those public sector workers that are going above and beyond their line of duty.

Tell us about the 'Integrity Icon' programme?

The programme is about iconifying the models of good governance – those that provide excellent service to ensure that government works for people. To name and fame local change makers: government workers in all spheres of work; people in grassroots to national departments. By getting local people to find local performers right where they are. We platform what is working and who

stands for what is working and what can we learn from them so that those systems that work can be duplicated in other sectors that work next to them.

5) Asset-Based Citizen-led Development

The conversation about Accountability Lab's work framed Simon Mayson's introduction to Asset-Based Citizen-led Development (ABCD). The ABCD approach is grounded in the catchphrase, exploring "what is strong, rather than what is wrong". Its heritage lies in the regeneration of small towns in the United States and internationally, [undertaken by Professors Jody Kretzmann and John McKnight](#).

- Simon Mayson applied these principles in action research in neighbourhoods of inner city Joburg, as part of his action research PhD.
- The first step involves identifying what is already there to work with, what the chosen town is unique for. The human capital (passionate people), the physical capital (an open field, an empty building, or a waterfall), or social capital – the relations with government, other towns, cities.

6) Offers and needs 'market'

Andrew took participants through a process of reflecting on what they can bring to the Network, and what they hope to gain from the Network: their offers and needs. This resulted in over 50 offers and around 30 needs being expressed in the chat – with the list of offers being far longer than the needs. The EDP has summarised this into a [Towns Network Offers and Needs Database](#), which we plan to keep as a live document.

Please have a look and email simon@wcedp.co.za to add to it!

7) Presentation on the national Small-Town Regeneration Strategy, Istell Orton, Citeplan

Colleagues from the National Department of Cooperative Governance (CoGTA) are excited about being part of the Changemaker Towns Network but had prior engagements and could not attend the launch. In their place, Istell Orton from Citeplan presented the Small-Town Regeneration Strategy and Implementation Plan (STR), launched on Monday 28 February, which they had led the development of.

The presentation is available [here](#) in the Changemaker Towns Network folder EDP has created (see [further reading](#) below).

Feedback and next steps

Highlights from the final session included the following:

- Hope in the future creates energy in the present. **Luther Diedricks.**
- There is value in a variety of voices: acknowledge that there are different passions and sectors within a community, that are all important. **Mariapaola McGurk.**
- Understanding 'collaboration' is important. Perhaps it is helpful to distinguish it from contestation, accommodation, avoidance, or compromise. Collaboration involves the pursuit of common goals and not either one party's or the other's. **Deon Pretorius.**
- It is important to transition from contestation to positive sum solution. **Shabari Shaily-Gerber**

- I hear that there are diverse needs... the network could meet that diversity with diverse ways of networking. **Doug Reeler.**
- It must be noted that many small-town municipalities lack the credibility within communities to initiate and implement plans unless the community are part of constructing the plans and common purpose. We must focus on creating the enabling collaborative environment, socializing communities about plans is not good enough anymore. **Paul Smith.**

Andrew identified what had stood out in this session:

- When taking community action, you always have a choice of ‘working with’, ‘working against’ and sometimes ‘working beyond’ government.
- How do you build trust in low trust environments? Being able to tell the story, and for everyone to listen is the starting point. Our ability to hear others when listening to their stories. Beyond story telling is stepping into action.
- This Network provides the opportunity to step into action that exceeds the partnership as a town.

Simon then provided a brief introduction to the Connections Carnival, which aims to provide small amounts of funding to build partnerships within towns around a mini-parade, festival, fete, or mini-carnival. The EDP will facilitate a low-key roadshow, which will connect these towns. [Find out](#) more, and [apply](#) to be one of these towns.

The launch ended in a ‘carnival-esque’ way, with participants making noise using whatever they had at hand, inspiring laughter, and a sense of connection across South Africa. Finally, some participants stayed behind for some further informal networking.

Further reading

Please go to the [EDP Extranet folder](#) that has been created for the Changemaker Towns Network. There you will find a folder containing everything from the launch, including the following documents.

- 1) Introduction to the Changemaker Towns Network
- 2) Offers and needs database (live)
- 3) Presentation on the Small-Town Regeneration Strategy and Implementation Plan (STR)
- 4) Text file of the chat
- 5) Recordings of the main session and breakaway groups.