

# Eastern Cape's Cradock part of government plan to revive small towns



OPINIONISTA

By Xolisa Phillip, 25 April 2022

Small towns are in trouble. The Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs has reviewed and updated the Small Town Regeneration Programme to arrest further decline and turn the tide on the trend.

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Cradock, northeast of Gqeberha in the Eastern Cape, is a small town rich in history and blessed with rugged scenery, but in need of regeneration.

Surrounded by commercial farms and a large rural population, the town is one of many such places around the country that are gateways to moderate upward mobility — an important mitigator of rapid urban migration.

As South Africa's metros and surrounding urban centres — the default economic hubs — swell to capacity, there is recognition within the establishment that the continued neglect of small towns is unsustainable.

That is one of the reasons the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs has reviewed the Small Town Regeneration Programme to gain an understanding of the initiative's performance, with a view to refinement and updating.

The programme was first conceived of by the South African Local Government Association in 2013 and made operational in 2015 in 18 small towns with the intention of regenerating, restoring and fulfilling the “economic potential of underperforming small towns”.

Seven years later, with the benefit of hindsight and the data gathered from the 18 small towns that were test cases for the programme, the department conducted the assessment to design a refreshed plan which reflects the changing thinking about local government development.

The outcome of the review factors in the Integrated Urban Development Framework of 2016 and, among other studies, the District Development Model of 2019.

The latter aims to address the fragmented nature of local government spheres by integrating planning among local, district and metro municipalities; the former is the overarching government strategy for urbanisation.

The main observation of the analysis is that small towns are in distress. That is especially the case for towns located on the fringes of rural areas, whose populations are taking flight to urban centres in search of greener pastures.

Basics, including schooling, healthcare and jobs, are contributing to the brain drain in small towns, which have lost “economic vitality due to the lack of incentives to retain the economically active labour force”.

The economies in these areas are not diversified enough, making the towns reliant on single industries that are vulnerable to shocks and even total collapse. The single industry dynamic is also not conducive to economic vibrancy, but correlates with stagnation.

Therefore, “these towns are ... unable to keep up with competition [for critical skills] from larger economic hubs”.

Bank closures are commonplace. So are “poorly functioning tourism departments, which fail to understand potential tourism assets and how to develop them”. “Department of Labour programmes are tailored to bigger towns and cities.”

The local municipalities of these towns often fall within district municipalities that are “catastrophically dysfunctional”.

The updated programme will adopt a phased approach which has identified 23 towns, including Cradock, to prioritise for the first leg of implementation.

Other noteworthy Eastern Cape small towns on the list are Aliwal North in Walter Sisulu Local Municipality, in the Joe Gqabi District Municipality; and Graff-Reinet and Aberdeen in Dr Beyers Naude Local Municipality, in the Sarah Baartman District Municipality.

Cradock is the seat of Inxuba Yethemba Local Municipality that encompasses Middelburg and falls within the Chris Hani District Municipality — a contender in the “catastrophically dysfunctional” district councils.

Administratively speaking, Inxuba Yethemba Local Municipality, in turn, is no better.

In the 2019/2020 *Consolidated general report on the local government audit outcomes*, Inxuba Yethemba was among “municipalities that disclosed significant doubt in their financial statements as to whether they will be able to continue operations in the near future”.

In the same report, the Chris Hani District was disclaimed with findings because “adhering to controls on a daily and monthly basis was not ingrained in the culture... due to... vacancies in the municipal manager and chief financial officer positions”.

The department published the review of the Small Town Regeneration Programme at the end of March. The existing cracks in the system are well known and captured in the assessment.

The expectation now is that the integrated approach will fill the accountability gap and draw on regional resources for the revival of small towns. **BM/DM**