

SAVING SOUTH AFRICA: LESSONS FROM THE UMNGENI MUNICIPALITY SUCCESS STORY

by CHRIS PAPPAS and SANDILE MNIKATHI

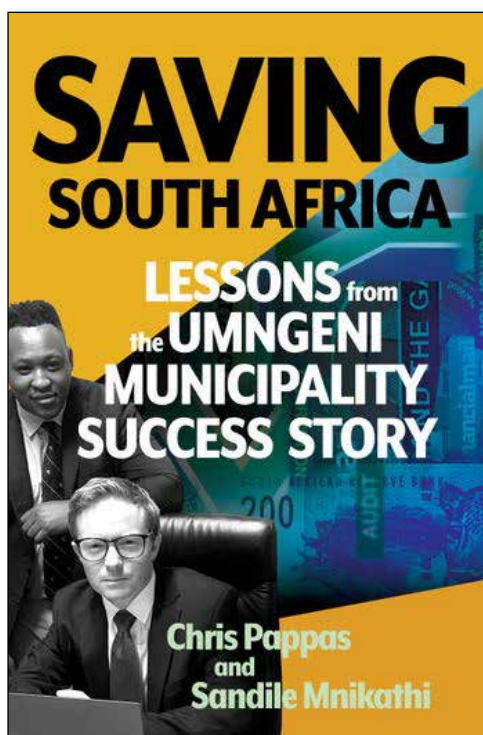
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IT is hard to imagine two people less alike in appearance. One is white, short and slight; the other African, tall and large. The one was educated at Hilton; the other at Howick High. But both are fully bilingual in Zulu and English, and young. They are Chris Pappas and Sandile Mnikathi, mayor and deputy mayor of uMngeni municipality where in 2021 the Democratic Alliance (DA) won control of a KwaZulu-Natal municipality for the first time, but by a whisker – just 42 votes.

Both of them emerged from university student politics, one in Pretoria the other KwaZulu-Natal. Not only do they represent a new generation of politician, but a new culture. One of the reasons why the DA took control of the municipality was the suspension of the municipal manager Thembeke Cibane after a Special Investigative Unit (Hawks) investigation had fingered her for R20 million of corrupt activity around Covid-19 relief. She did her best to obstruct the incoming administration, but was thwarted by ANC factionalism and the courts. Her skills, which seem to have included the doctoring of minutes, were redeployed by the ANC to Mangaung.

Pappas and Mnikathi were confronted by a familiar scenario: the entrenched politics of patronage and entitlement based on party affiliation. Predictably this approach exploited appointments and supply chain management. As the authors comment, ‘the ANC infects everything for their own gain.’ Not only had these practices to be uprooted, but the financial damage rectified amid expectations that uMngeni would now be run like the Western Cape. It seems that while there had been no shredding, a great of information was obscured.

What the incoming administration found was debt of R250m, much of it unpaid rates or created by electricity theft. Many projects were incomplete but paid for, and there was abuse of overtime. Weeding out favouritism did not go unchallenged and there is an account of a particularly expensive and aggressive gun-wielding



plumber. The ultimate price was paid on 5 December 2023 when the chief whip, Nhlahayenza Ndlovu, was murdered at home in Mpophomeni. The authors describe it as ‘senseless’, but there would have been a reason that made perfect sense to the killers. And, inevitably, the case is still unresolved.

There were multiple scams. A municipal official was siphoning off toilet entrance fees, security companies were overcharging and failing to perform, and a firm of lawyers was billing routine work to senior expensive staff. Such misappropriation was uncovered by following the financial trail. At a more mundane level just one of six

municipal tractors was functioning and four of sixty brush cutters. The antidote was a matter of common sense and basic efficiency, but it understandably took time to clear the backlog and inculcate a new culture of service. One of the heartening revelations of this book is that most employees adopted a professional attitude once they recognised the supportive nature of the new administration.

The most important task was to reprioritise the budget and strip away less relevant and stalled projects in favour of immediate need. In this way fruitless expenditure designed to reward individuals rather than the community was axed. This was complicated by legislation governing municipal budgeting designed to prevent corruption that inhibits flexibility. One positive measure was timeous and effective expenditure of municipal infrastructure grant (MIG) finance, where efficiency is rewarded by national treasury. But a negative was the ANC-controlled provincial government predisposed to obstruct, and even break the law if it meant scoring a point. The different but complementary responsibilities of local and district municipalities were also a problem where the latter, uMgungundlovu, is run by the ANC.

The filling of vacant posts and adoption of sound principles of project management followed. So did the monitoring of governance standards: two councillors

were sanctioned for breaking their oath of office by inciting non-payment to the municipality. Specific attention was paid to the Curry's Post landfill and the role of waste pickers, the Howick swimming pool whose lifeguards were unqualified, uMngeni's obligations to fire protection, and vehicle and equipment maintenance.

The new administration worked to strip away the climate of fear and subservience that characterises ANC operations. It aimed to serve a notional uMngeni resident called Gogo Dlamini through regular community engagement aided by the creativity of smaller targeted budgets with demonstrable benefit. Pappas demands insight and foresight from his colleagues and treats ideas accordingly; not by their source.

Unfortunately, this book shows some signs of being completed in haste, presumably in time for the national and provincial elections. In the later chapters there are sections that seem contradictory with tables missing vital elements. Throughout, the Zulu monarch's name is misspelt Misizulu.

Umngeni municipality has earned successive unqualified audits after years of corruption and this book is ample testimony that local government does not have to be a shambles. It can be run professionally in the service of the people on the basis of integrity, transparency and accountability rather than political vanguardism, antiquated ideology and corrupt cadres.

It is at municipal level that politics most clearly affects the average citizen. Much is made of the enduring spatial legacies of apartheid but there is reason to argue, suggests this book, that national and provincial centralisation has reinforced them; and that local devolution could be more effective. Many of the small towns of South Africa are irredeemably broken, but there is a sense that the example of uMngeni might represent a bridgehead to better governance in others. The youthful Pappas and Mnikathi have amply demonstrated how it can be done.

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