

## Case Study Report

# Urban Regeneration and Small-Town Revitalisation, Tools for redressing spatial injustices

## A case Study of eMaxesibeni Town, Eastern Cape, South Africa

Pilisiwe. Z MASIBA, University of Johannesburg, South Africa. [pili.masiba@gmail.com](mailto:pili.masiba@gmail.com)

Sandla MASINYANE, Umzimvubu Local Municipality, South Africa. [lmasinyane@gmail.com](mailto:lmasinyane@gmail.com)

Thulisile. N MPHAMBUKELI, University of Johannesburg, South Africa. [tmphambukeli@uj.ac.za](mailto:tmphambukeli@uj.ac.za)

### Abstract

*In recent times, urban regeneration and small-town revitalisation have been a buzzing topic in South African urban planning. The National Development Plan of 2013 (vision 2030) strives to eliminate poverty and inequalities in South Africa by placing people at the centre of development. The NDP 2013 states that South Africa needs an economy which is inclusive, and dynamic and where the fruits of the growth shall be shared equitably amongst South Africans (South African Government, 2013). Urban regeneration and small-town revitalisation are some of the tools which are used by the provincial government to redress inequalities of the past while improving service delivery through improved access to basic services. Local governments are responsible for implementing these projects to transform the economies and social space of small towns through the funding received from the national treasury. Urban regeneration refers to the vision and action which leads to compacting urban problems, bringing about improved sustainable economies, environments and social conditions in an area that has been subjected to change. The purpose of urban regeneration is to come up with strategies for the promotion of local economic development. Its main objectives are aimed at reducing unemployment and poverty by finding spatial initiatives which can generate employment and economic activities and thus boost investor confidence in an area. The main goal of small towns' revitalisation is to redress the socio-economic decline of small rural towns by assisting local municipalities in improving basic service delivery. Small rural towns are faced with the challenges of declining economic activities due to the migration of people moving from these towns to cities and these rural towns are left to deteriorate. The goal of small towns revitalisation is achieved through five strategic objectives which are implemented to reach the end goal. This paper focuses on the principles, processes and themes of urban regeneration and how these can be applied to small towns such as eMaxesibeni to redress the spatial and socio-economic inequalities. Secondly, discuss the five goals of small towns' revitalisation and how they can assist in reversing the socio-economic decline of small towns. The paper consists of three sections which are the review of the existing literature, spatial data analysis of the study area and the regeneration and revitalisation projects implemented in eMaxesibeni town.*

### Keywords

*Urban regeneration, small town revitalisation, Spatial injustice*

## 1. Introduction

In recent years urban regeneration and small-town regeneration strategies in post-colonial and post-apartheid South Africa have been used to redress past spatial injustices and promote sustainable development in rural towns facing socio-economic decline. The initiatives aim to revitalise rural towns with declining economies and decaying towns by focusing on improvements in infrastructure and socioeconomic revitalisation. Spatial injustice is the uneven distribution of services, resources and economic opportunities across different geographic regions (Setianto and Gamal, 2021). This unequal distribution manifests in the marginalisation of rural towns, segregated urban centres and communities with inadequate basic services resulting in socio-economic consequences.

The legacy of colonialism, apartheid spatial planning and post-apartheid planning systems in the South African context has further perpetuated segregation between the wealthy and the poor, uneven provision of resources and development between regions. In South African history rural areas and towns were perceived as reserves for cheap labour for industrialising and mining major cities posing great challenges in urban and regional planning (Bundy, 2020). The small towns revitalisation and urban regeneration initiatives are tools used by the South African government to redress the past spatial injustices by reversing the socio-economic decline of rural communities and towns by making them more vibrant, sustainable and inclusive.

Urban regeneration and small-town revitalisation is a complex system that focuses on transforming urban landscapes to address social, environmental and economic issues. Urban regeneration approaches within the field of urban planning aim at revitalising urban spaces which are underused, decaying and neglected to restore their economic value and make them more vibrant (Tallon, 2020). It is used as a tool to modernise districts and neighbourhoods to align with the needs of the current generation without compromising the needs of future generations. The approach is grounded on the restructuring of current land uses, provision of basic services, improvement of existing infrastructure and inclusion of public-private partnerships thus ensuring the inclusivity of affected stakeholders and sustainability (Cysek-Pawlak and Pabich, 2021).

In contrast bad urban regeneration approaches can lead to poor economic performance further perpetuate social inequalities and hinder sustainable urban development hence it is important to have an in-depth understanding of the concept and its consequences (Tallon, 2020). Bad effects of urban regeneration are mostly experienced where local policies and strategies do not have the aspect of community engagements and public participation of stakeholders. Urban regeneration strategies generally affect the poor of the

poorest as the projects are completed, land uses change, housing and land values tend to escalate and residents are forced to relocate from their neighbourhoods.

For the government to achieve this goal it needs to pursue five strategic objectives which include, improved urban planning and public infrastructure, improved local economic benefits, promoting focused, coherent and integrated intervention packages in selected towns and lastly having a deeper knowledge base on the design and delivery of effective small-town revitalization programmes. This requires local governments to adopt policies which will take into account the unique characteristics of the area. The eMaxesibeni small town's urban regeneration project presents an opportunity to explore how the initiatives can be used as a means to address spatial injustices. This case study could inform theory and policy related to addressing spatial injustice across different geographies and can act as a model for planners advocating for equal distribution of resources, sustainable development and inclusivity in small towns and urban regeneration approaches.

## 2. Background and context of the project

### 2.1. Urban Regeneration and Small Town Revitalisation of EmaXesibeni Town

Umzimvubu Local Municipality undertook to implement prepared the Small Town Revitalization funded by the Office of The Premier, Province of the Eastern Cape. The office of the premier secured funding from National Treasury over three years to assist selected municipalities with small-town revitalization projects as part of redressing inequality of the past while improving service delivery through improved access to basic services. The comprehensive business plan identified interventions to improve small towns and focus areas. The overall goal of the small-town development programme is to reverse the socio-economic decline of small towns by supporting municipalities in improving basic services provision in the small towns.

**This goal is to be achieved through pursuing the four strategic objectives:**

1. Improved urban planning and public infrastructure
2. Improving local economic benefits
3. Promoting focused, coherent and integrated intervention packages in selected towns
4. Deeper knowledge base on the design and delivery of effective small-town revitalization programmes.

**Umzimvubu Local Municipality submitted the following projects for funding from Office of The Premier as part of the Small-Town Revitalization Programme:**

1. Upgrading of eMaxesibeni Cemetery
2. Upgrading of eMaxesibeni Town Streets
3. Development of eMaxesibeni Transportation Hub

## 2.2 Project locality

eMaxesibeni town is one of the small rural towns of Umzimvubu Local Municipality. The municipality falls under Alfred Nzo District Municipality in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa which has been declared by President Cyril Ramaphosa as one of the poorest districts in the country. The two towns eMaxesibeni and KwaBhaca are administrative centres in the Umzimvubu Local Municipality and they are recognised as primary economic nodes as per the Municipal Spatial Development Framework. The project area comprises of eMaxesibeni Town. The locality of the project area eMaxesibeni ( previously known as Mount Ayliff) is presented in Figure 1.

The land uses within the town of Mount Ayliff are predominantly commercial and residential, some parts of the town on the outskirts are being utilised for industrial purposes but some of the land uses are illegal and do not comply Land Use scheme which is the town planning legislation used for the development of eMaxesibeni Town. The Umzimvubu Integrated Development Plan (2023/2024) estimates that of that 95% of the population of the municipality reside in rural spaces with the rest (5%) in the two urban centres of KwaBhaca (15 444 people) and eMaxesibeni (6 618). The 6,618 people are the direct beneficiaries of the urban regeneration and small towns revitalisation project.

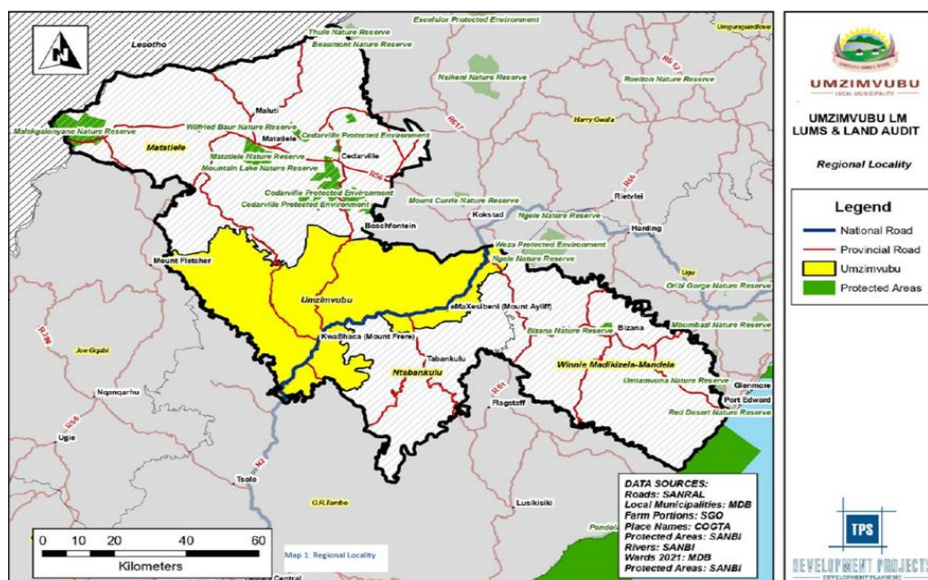


Figure 1: Locality map of eMaxesibeni Town, Source: Umzimvubu Local Municipality STR proposal

### 3. Project Implementation and Impact

#### 3.1 Upgrading of eMaxesibeni Town Streets and Walkways

The project entailed upgrading the general landscape along Main Street and the adjoining Streets, modernisation of intersections and street furniture. The total length of roadway upgraded is 1.6km. The upgrading of the streets included concrete block paving of sidewalk areas from the edge of the road carriageway to adjacent boundary fence or commercial building veranda, installation of new concrete kerbs and stormwater drainage channels, and installation of PVC pipe sleeve for optical fibre service cables and construction of traffic circles at two four-way intersections in Main Streets. The roadway of all streets identified for the upgrade is currently surfaced with asphalt and walkways paved ensuring mobility and walkability of the town.



Figure 2: Upgrading of eMaxesibeni streets and walkways. Source: Own Compilation

#### 3.2. Construction Of eMaxesibeni Transportation Hub

The site identified for the transport Hub is located within the eMaxesibeni Town in Ward 28 of Umzimvubu Local Municipality. The site is located approximately 260m from the core activity area of the eMaxesibeni Central Business District. The entire site was a greenfield before the construction. The site development included the construction of formal hawker stalls, workshops for mechanics, and bus and taxi ranks. This project is expected to boost the local economy of the town as it provides over 100 formal trading spaces for small businesses.



Figure 3: eMaxesibeni transportation Hub: Source own compilation

### 3.3 Upgrading of eMaxesibeni Cemetery

EmaXesibeni Cemetery is located at coordinates 30° 48' 31" (S) and 29° 22' 31" (E). The nearest town to the project site is eMaxesibeni (Mount Ayliff), within which the project is located and is approximately 1km (drive distance) from the eMaxesibeni CBD. EmaXesibeni Cemetery covers an area of 40 100 square metres (4 hectares) and only 2 000 square metres (0.2 hectares) or 5% is used. There are no public building amenities at the cemetery. The scope of the project included building structures and road works including stormwater drainage channels. The buildings proposed for the upgrade of the cemetery included a Guardhouse and Ablution Block. Due to budget limitations, the construction of the Administration Block has been placed on hold but has already been incorporated in the project design and design drawings.

The civil works proposed for the upgrade of the cemetery included surfacing of the main external access road, re-construction and gravelling of an auxiliary gravel access road, provision of external parking, reconfiguration and rehabilitation of existing concrete block paved internal driveways and provision of stormwater drainage control channels.



Figure 4: Upgrading of eMaxasibeni Cemetery. Source: Own Compilation.

#### 4. Future proposal and recommendations

Addressing past spatial injustices in eMaxesibeni Town through the use of tools such as small-town revitalisation and urban regeneration initiatives presents a framework for sustainable socio-economic development within urban planning. Key proposals incorporate, community hubs that are multifunctional in terms of integrating social services such as access to basic education, health care systems, economic opportunities and social spaces. This approach improves the accessibility of social services and reduces the dependency of eMaxesibeni town on larger cities like Kokstad, Margate and Port Shepstone. The over-reliance on neighbouring major cities has largely contributed to the economic decline of small rural towns like eMaxesibeni.

Furthermore, the introduction of mixed-use zones in the CBD and the promotion of affordable housing closer to commercial activities will reduce spatial segregation and thereby encourage socioeconomic diversity in the town. It is proposed that the municipality consider improving public transportation infrastructure that will link the eMaxesibeni town with the surrounding communities it serves. Additionally, it is proposed that the municipality integrate digital and smart technologies such as GIS-Based tools to assist in decision-making for future urban development and monitoring of spatial disparities within the area. Improvements in the agricultural sector and local economic development within the municipality are still required because this is the primary economic sector which will contribute to the economic growth of the town. These proposals and recommendations focus on restructuring eMaxesibeni town's urban landscape and ensuring that the town is more sustainable, resilient, efficient and inclusive.

## 5. References

- Bundy, C., 2020. Poverty and Inequality in South Africa: A History, in: Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History. Oxford University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.659>
- Cysek-Pawlak, M.M., Pabich, M., 2021. Walkability – the New Urbanism principle for urban regeneration. *J. Urban. Int. Res. Placemaking Urban Sustain.* 14, 409–433.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17549175.2020.1834435>
- Liao, Z., Liu, M., 2023. Critical barriers and countermeasures to urban regeneration from the stakeholder perspective: a literature review. *Front. Sustain. Cities* 5, 1115648.  
<https://doi.org/10.3389/frsc.2023.1115648>
- Mthiyane, D.B., Wissink, H., Chiwawa, N., 2022. The impact of rural–urban migration in South Africa: A case of KwaDukuza municipality. *J. Local Gov. Res. Innov.* 3. <https://doi.org/10.4102/jolgr.v3i0.56>
- Setianto, M.A.S., Gamal, A., 2021. Spatial justice in the distribution of public services. *IOP Conf. Ser. Earth Environ. Sci.* 673, 012024. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/673/1/012024>
- Shmaryahu-Yeshurun, Y., 2024. Gentrifiers of Color: Class Inequalities in Ethnic/Racial Neighborhood Displacement. *J. Am. Plann. Assoc.* 90, 434–451.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2023.2251981>
- Tallon, A., 2020. Urban Regeneration in the UK, 3rd ed. Routledge, Third edition. | Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351030304>