The Towns Action Network

Collaborative action for Small Town Regeneration in South Africa

December 2024

Foreword

Nishendra Moodley
CEO, Economic Development Partnership

Small towns form an important but often neglected part of South Africa's socio-economic landscape. They support local, regional and national economies through commerce, agriculture and tourism. They also provide essential employment and foster social stability, serving as a crucial link between rural and urban economies. Thriving small towns therefore mean resilience and growth across the country.

Yet many small towns are seeing rapid decline, plagued by high unemployment, deteriorating infrastructure and limited access to services. This impacts the quality of life for residents, while the resulting out-migration increases pressure on cities and urban systems.

At the heart of this decline is a governance challenge. Our constitutional and legal framework identifies politicians, administrations and communities as the constituents of a municipality. The relationship between these three sets of actors is important to the performance and revitalisation of small towns and is often where accountability and trust break down.

Amid these complexities, the Towns Action Network (TAN) was established as a response to the urgent need for revitalisation strategies to treat the symptoms of small-town decline, address its root causes and build resilience.

TAN is a nationwide, action-oriented learning and support network dedicated to regenerating South African small towns by connecting changemakers and fostering cross-sector partnerships.

It uses a strengths-based approach to engage stakeholders in co-creating sustainable solutions and driving community-led progress. TAN is aligned with national policies that prioritise small-town regeneration as a critical national issue, and it is built on the pillars of participatory governance and active citizenry. The network fosters mutual accountability by nurturing transparent relationships between communities, municipal administrations and councils. This collaborative foundation enables citizens to play an active role in shaping the future of their towns.

A collaborative intermediary organisation such as the EDP is well-placed to provide a neutral platform that bridges the often-disparate interests of local governments, civil society and local small-town communities. In learning collectively and sharing responsibilities for problem-solving, small town stakeholders are supported in responding to challenges and building resilient, locally-driven economies that thrive over the long term.

TAN seeks to amplify what is possible when we combine the strengths of diverse groups toward a shared goal: supporting economically vibrant, socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable small towns. The lessons learned in the process of convening this network are of value for all those undertaking their own place-based regeneration interventions and could benefit South Africa more broadly.

Introduction

Working together to revitalise South Africa's small towns

Small towns are crucial to South Africa's economy, linking cities and farms while providing essential services to surrounding communities. However, despite most South Africans living outside major cities, many small towns are struggling to survive. Local governments face severe financial problems that make it difficult to maintain basic services and infrastructure. In 2022, the Auditor General of South found that 28% of local municipalities had failed or were close to failing.

Years of poor management have led to frequent power and water cuts, along with deteriorating roads and public facilities. This drives away skilled residents and businesses, especially young people. As investment drops, local economies weaken and community life is damaged. Many residents express feeling forgotten by those meant to serve them.

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021) highlighted problems in small towns but also sparked new community action. Changemakers from both communities and government came together to help their neighbours, using local connections and online platforms to build hope and create change.

Seeing the power of these local efforts, eight organisations including the Economic Development Partnership (EDP) created the Towns Action Network (TAN) in April 2022.

TAN's goal is to leverage the collective energy of small town residents and municipalities to regenerate small towns across South Africa.

This national learning and support network connects and empowers these actors and helps them learn from each other by sharing useful resources and successful approaches to small town regeneration.

This report outlines the broad goals and structure of TAN, with case studies providing snapshots of how its support has galvanised local partnerships in the Great Karoo and Western Cape.

Aligned with national efforts to regenerate small towns

TAN works alongside the government's Small Town Regeneration (STR) strategy, which aims to revive small towns through coordinated development programmes. The strategy was introduced by the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) in 2012 and adopted by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) in 2014. It advocates for a 'whole of society' approach that brings together local government, businesses and community groups to work on solutions and focuses on building stronger municipalities while encouraging local partnerships across sectors.

TAN supports this goal by connecting people and organisations looking to create change, sharing information and resources, and helping communities work with authorities to create and maintain improvements.

About the Towns Action Network

A diverse ecosystem for bottom-up change

TAN believes that regeneration efforts are most effective when local communities work together to create change. The network supports small town changemakers – individuals and groups who care deeply about their communities and understand local needs. Built on two main ideas - that citizens should actively participate in decisions (active citizenry), and that government should work with communities (participatory governance) - TAN moves away from top-down approaches. Instead of focusing only on problems, TAN explores existing strengths and encourages shared responsibility between residents and local authorities.

TAN works in three main ways

Connecting changemakers

Bringing together residents, business owners, community groups and local officials to share knowledge and learn from each other.

Supporting local action

Tools, guidance and small grants help local groups work together, building on existing community strengths.

Building mutual accountability

Community members and officials talk openly in safe spaces, leading to better services and shared responsibility.

Over the last two years, TAN's activities have included

- **Knowledge sharing:** Quarterly online gatherings feature expert speakers facilitating peer learning among 270+ South African changemakers on themes like 'Action for Accountability' and 'Radical Collaboration'. Recordings and reports support ongoing learning.
- **Stakeholder engagement:** The seven TAN support partners represent civil society, government and small town residents. Regular meetings help to build relationships and enable knowledge exchange for informed decision-making and project implementation.
- **Tools and resources:** Features include an offers and needs catalogue, local partnerships mapping, uKesa platform presence and newsletters with resources. A digital resource platform is being developed.
- **Storytelling and narrative change:** Workshops empower changemakers to share experiences, while storytelling across TAN platforms aims to shift perceptions about the potential of small towns.
- **Support for local partnerships:** Currently, TAN funds partnering pilots in the Great Karoo and the Western Cape. In addition, TAN's support partners also target and foster local partnerships to strengthen communities and improve accountability in other areas across the country.

A collaborative governance structure

The EDP convenes TAN, working with seven support partner organisations who bring expertise across the two main pillars in areas such as community development, local governance and social accountability. The network operates on two levels: on one level, support partners provide guidance and expertise. At another level, local changemakers are provided with the tools and sometimes funding to implement partnering projects in their towns.

The EDP manages the network which involves handling project planning, budgets and activity coordination. With funding from the Finnish Embassy, TAN supports local regeneration projects in the Great Karoo and Western Cape. Support partners contribute their own funding, time and networks, providing a broader presence of TAN across South Africa.

Both the EDP and TAN's support partners to deliver projects that test new ways of working together and share what they learn with other members. For instance, Citeplan/Restaurare brings important learnings from its implementation of the STR in three pilot towns: Senekal, Modimolle and Piketberg. This collective approach creates a rich exchange of knowledge and allows the network to do more than any single organisation could achieve alone.

SALGA

National association representing all 257 local governments, facilitating regional economic development through municipal collaboration.

PARI

Research institute focusing on municipal engagement and Integrated Development Planning (IDP) processes, providing expertise in public participation methods.

Citeplan/Restaurare

National planning consultancy implementing COGTA's STR strategy, specialising in participatory governance and sustainable urban development.

EDP

Collaborative intermediary organisation and TAN convener, building partnerships and facilitating shared learning between partners and members.

Karoo Development Foundation

Regional development organisation bringing expertise in citizen-led solutions for Karoo small towns.

Accountability Lab

Social accountability organisation strengthening citizen engagement and good governance practices in local communities.

Kagiso Trust

Development organisation providing civil society support, with expertise in local governance and community capacity building.

Ranyaka

Urban planning consultancy specialising in social cohesion through multi-stakeholder engagement and community-based asset development.

Finnish Fund for Local Cooperation

"TAN's approach of inspiring joint action and shared learning to revive local economies aligns with our goal to strengthen civil society for a vibrant, well-governed democracy. Bringing together municipalities, businesses and residents in the spirit of cooperation is key to good governance and empowers citizens to actively contribute to solutions."

Tsakane Bok, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

The Finnish Ambassador to South Africa Anne Lammilla (2020-2023) meets community members from Genadendal, Western Cape.

Case study

Active citizenry in the Theewaterskloof Municipality

Every small town has distinct cultural identities and varying economic needs. TAN's approach of providing funding, building local capacity and connecting changemakers helps communities drive their own development solutions, as seen in the Theewaterskloof Municipality in the Overberg region of Western Cape. This area is known for its natural beauty and fruit production, yet faces significant challenges like poverty, high unemployment and service delivery problems. Through its support partners, TAN worked with communities in Genadendal, Grabouw and nearby areas to help residents understand their role as active citizens and shape their towns' economy. The network provided funding, resources and promotion to support cultural events that strengthened community bonds. Following these early successes, TAN is now in communication with the Theewaterskloof Municipality to explore how to initiate the STR strategy in these areas.

Mapping communities for local solutions

In Genadendal and nearby areas, TAN support partner Ranyaka used its 4THRIVE method to help communities work together on local challenges. Around 70 residents joined workshops to map the community's assets – from buildings and natural spaces to people's skills and networks. This helped them create a community plan with clear measurable goals that could inform the local IDP process. The approach puts residents at the centre of solutions, showing that lasting improvements come when communities plan together and share a common goal. This way of working yields useful information for local municipalities and supports sustainable interventions as communities feel a sense of ownership in their design.

"Mapping provides specific, localised data that reflects the Valley community's unique characteristics and needs. By focusing on place-based factors, the community can address relevant issues rather than apply generic solutions that might not fit the local context."

Trainer, Ranyaka

Unifying local groups in the Genadendal valley

"Every one of us really wants to make a difference in our communities.... just working together on this goal has already been hugely beneficial for community cohesion and building forward together. It confirms that when you pull people together around a common purpose, you generate synergy and amazing things can happen."

Organiser, Changemaker Festival

The Changemakers Festival, organised by the Valley of Six Changemakers Network returned for its second year, uniting about 30 local organisations from Genadendal, Greyton and the wider municipality. With TAN's support, this community celebration connected people of all ages through workshops, exhibitions, food, talent shows and sports. One highlight was elders sharing traditional knowledge with young people through storytelling. The festival created spaces for people to come together and celebrate, building the connections needed to improve their towns. The timing was important – the festival took place after floods had hit the area hard. For young performers who won prizes in the talent show, the money helped their families recover while boosting their confidence.

Building cultural connections through small grants

TAN's Connections Carnival provided small grants to seven community projects across 12 South African towns. Each project used local strengths and resources to create social or economic benefits. The successful initiatives included youth storytelling and art events in the Eastern Cape, traditional knowledge sharing in KwaZulu-Natal and community activities in the Free State. The Genadendal grant winners – the Valley of Six Changemakers Network – organised their own Changemakers Festival, showing how small investments can spark longer term action.

"The idea behind the Connections Carnival really struck a chord, and provided us, as changemakers who had been coordinating very well during the pandemic, with an opportunity to collaborate again."

Doug Reeler, Valley of Six Changemakers Network

"The whole practice of storytelling and story-writing are much undervalued in the world of social change. But many of the most effective social change practices are rooted in storytelling."

Facilitator, Barefoot Guide Connection

Telling stories of change

TAN uses storytelling to share lessons from local changemakers and inspire others. Working with Barefoot Guide Connection, TAN ran a two-day workshop teaching 20 participants to write about their community work and the changes they are making. Beyond giving active citizens a stronger voice, the workshop strengthened connections between community members. Each person shared their experiences and hopes for their community's future. In a place like Genadendal, with its rich history, these stories help record and value rural life and local business.

Case study

Culture as a catalyst for regeneration in the Great Karoo

The Karoo is a vast semi-arid region in South Africa's interior. Many towns here face a slow decline, with changing climate and economic patterns. Young people are leaving for cities in search of work opportunities. In response, the Karoo Small Town Regeneration initiative (Karoo STR) brings together local government, development agencies, universities and community groups to build a new future for these towns.

TAN support partner SALGA helps local governments run heritage sites and tourism projects better. They bring municipalities together through events like the Karoo STR Conference, where towns share what works to build sustainable tourism and solve common problems. This support helps towns improve their public spaces, fix infrastructure and promote local attractions for economic growth. By preserving their heritage, Karoo towns are supporting local businesses and strengthening communities.

"Through our support of the entire Karoo region and municipalities within it, we are really trying to bring tourism to the forefront at a national level, aligning with partners like the National Department of Tourism."

Sagwata Manyike, SALGA

Helping Karoo towns grow stronger

The Karoo Development Foundation (KDF), one of TAN's support partners, leads efforts to use the region's rich heritage as an engine for growth. Their focus on cultural tourism creates economic opportunities while nurturing community bonds. TAN supports this work through funding and resources, showing how culture can help revive small towns and create local opportunities.

Learning from museums on the Karoo's Forgotten Highway

Museum leaders from small towns along the Karoo's Forgotten Highway heritage route visited the Togryers Museum in Ceres and Tulbagh Museum Complex in September 2023. Over two days, they learned about exhibit design, management and working with communities. The group toured displays, talked with museum staff about running costs and programmes, and saw new ways to share local stories.

The team then joined other museum workers at the South African Museum Association conference in Bloemfontein. They focused on using digital tools to preserve and share their collections. The museum teams took these new skills and connections with national institutions and applied them to the Karoo's Forgotten Highway. Doing this helped them protect their towns' history and share it more widely.

Bringing new life to Fraserburg Museum

Two museum projects, with TAN support, helped bring new life to small towns along the Karoo's Forgotten Highway. The Fraserburg Museum was able to invest in improving its infrastructure to make it easier for people to experience the museum and learn about local history. The second museum project – the Mary Moffat Inventory Project – could sort and classify its historical assets linked to the missionary's work and indigenous culture.

These changes did more than just protect historical artefacts. They were an investment into towns along the Karoo's Forgotten Highway route that helped build residents' future by creating self-sustaining and contextually unique opportunities to grow the local economy. The combination of museum learning exchanges and refurbished facilities has empowered citizens to shape the heritage economy and give communities a place to share their stories.

Five lessons from small town partnerships

Working closely with TAN's support partners and spending time in different communities has shown us what happens when people come together to make their towns better. Through community meetings, local events and countless conversations, we have seen how bringing people together sparks new energy and ideas. These five insights come from our hands-on work with changemakers across South Africa, and informs how we will work together going forward.

A reflection by Nobungcwele Mbem, TAN project lead

1 Each town needs its own partnership approach

Every town faces similar challenges, yet the way they manifest can vary. Some have proactive local governments but struggle to engage residents. Others have active community members but face inefficient municipal systems. TAN's work shows that while many problems and solutions are shared across contexts, success depends on tailoring approaches to fit each town's unique characteristics: its cultural and historical identity, social dynamics and the makeup of its leadership and civil society. Broad methodologies can and should be informed by evidence about what works universally, but their application must consider the lessons learned from applying these in the distinct context of each community.

2 Government and citizens must work as partners

South Africa has many active citizens, but real change happens when they work hand-in-hand with government. TAN's work shows that neither group can do it alone. When officials and community members talk openly, government plans have a greater chance of matching what communities actually need. This partnership helps community projects gain official support and funding, while it helps government projects win legitimacy with communities. TAN brings these groups together, making sure both sides share responsibility for improving their towns.

3 Successful collaboration is an art

Experience from TAN's local projects shows that both municipalities and community members need to build their skills in working together. Working with others is difficult, and partnering improves with practice. Good collaboration builds trust and understanding of how different groups work, making it easier to join forces. Intermediary organisations like the EDP can play a key role in building the abilities of government and communities to reach understanding of one another quicker and begin to work together effectively.

4 Hope drives community action

Projects supported by TAN show that hope plays two key roles in changing communities, especially in small towns dealing with big challenges. It gives people both the mental strength and practical push they need to imagine a better future and work towards it. This makes hope central to how TAN works in sustaining people's energy and willingness to drive change especially when things get tough.

> "It's not every day where you kind of have a programme where you just celebrate... and it was that moment whereby, you know, as judges, you're sitting there listening to people's singing and stuff, but then the community's response to the singers was, I think, something that was so special."

Community member, Genadendal

5 Strong local partnerships build lasting growth

Well-governed partnerships between local governments and community organisations create conditions that attract businesses and skilled people. These networks work on multiple levels – from teams within municipalities to networks with local changemakers. This gives municipalities a strong base to tackle community problems and support growth over time and involves communities in imagining their towns' future. Good partnerships build networks where everyone's efforts combine to strengthen both the local economy and improve community life.

Conclusion

Learning networks such as TAN create essential connections between government and communities that strengthen the local partnerships necessary for small town regeneration. The network's distributed structure that combines the reach and resources of multiple support partners has created a platform for collaboration in numerous communities. By anchoring its approach in active citizenship and participatory governance, partnering models like TAN could help influence policies that truly reflect local needs. Looking ahead, investing in and expanding this partnering model has the potential to strengthen South Africa's small towns, which are crucial to inclusive economic growth.

Suggested citation

The Economic Development Partnership (2024). *The Towns Action Network: Collaborative action for Small Town Regeneration in South Africa.* Available from: wcedp.co.za/tan-report/

Acknowledgements

The Towns Action Network (TAN) is an action-based learning and support network that empowers changemakers in South African small towns to improve local economies through partnership and shared learning. TAN is convened by the Economic Development Partnership (EDP) and supported by seven organisations that lead the regeneration of small towns in South Africa. Co-funding from the Finnish Fund for Local Cooperation and the EDP is gratefully acknowledged.

For more information about TAN, visit: **wcedp.co.za/towns-action-network**

Reach out to the EDP via **info@wcedp.co.za**

This booklet is based on qualitative data collected from project participants.

Written: Kate Ribet & Nobungcwele Mbem
Edited: Nishendra Moodley & Natalie Tannous
Design: On The Loose | www.ontheloose.co.za
Photos: Ashraf Hendricks | Barry Christianson | Ranyaka | KDF | EDP

accountabilitylab SOUTH AFRICA
KAGISO TRUST Overcoming poverty
KDF Karoo Development Foundation
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