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# Municipal

## *(Eco)services*

**Obed Mlaba** describes the importance of ecosystem services to cities and shows how local action can ensure millennial change

It is a matter of concern that the role of local government in meeting the Millennium Development Goals has not been more broadly acknowledged. Local government directly provides many of the basic services that are the focus of the Goals, such as water, sanitation, public health, energy, and housing. Its planning and regulatory functions also accord it an increasing role in protecting the natural resource base, on which many of the global poor still directly depend for survival. So equitable and sustainable access to these basic needs and to the natural resource base – both

key to achieving the MDGs – can only be realized through strong, decentralized local government and an informed, supportive citizenry.

Local government's pivotal role in implementing sustainable development was profiled at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) at a session entitled Local Action Moves the World. There, 900 participants from 69 countries inaugurated Local Action 21 – the new action-oriented phase of Local Agenda 21, – as a motto, mandate, and movement for advancing sustainability at the local level. Similarly, the Local Government Declaration delivered to the Summit concluded:

"We live in an increasingly interconnected, interdependent world. The local and global are intertwined....Ten years after Rio, it is time for action by all spheres of government, all partners. And local action, undertaken in solidarity, can move the world."

Sustainable development is being achieved in Durban through implementing the eThekweni Municipality's Integrated Development Plan (IDP) – a legally mandated and Council – adopted manifesto for city change which has ensured that sustainable development has become "a fundamental driver of the City Strategy." While it prioritises service provision and economic development, Durban's IDP is different to many others in clearly profiling the importance of the natural resource base in ensuring long-term urban sustainability.

This approach is directly in line with Goal 7 of the MDGs, which highlights the environment's central role in providing the goods and services that sustain human development. Managing and protecting the environment is also a key factor in ensuring that the targets set in the other Millennium Development Goals are achieved. Better natural resource management, for example, increases the income and nutrition of poor people, while improved water and sanitation management reduces child mortality, exposure to diseases such as malaria, and the risk of disaster from floods.

### Natural resources

Durban's IDP outlines the interdependence of development and environment in a chapter entitled "Sustaining the natural and built environment". This acknowledges that "all development must function in harmony with the natural resources and processes upon which human health and the economy so often depend". A key tool in achieving this integrated vision is the eThekweni Environmental Services Management Plan (EESMP), the Council-approved plan to protect the city's natural resource base of the city.

City residents benefit from a range of environmental goods and services provided by its natural ecosystems – including fuel and food, flood prevention, water provision, breakdown of waste, and recreational areas. Unspoilt landscapes also give people a sense of place and a feeling of well-being. Different types of open space supply different benefits e.g. grasslands supply grazing, while rivers supply water. People use ecosystem benefits on a daily basis – e.g. soil for agriculture and rivers for fishing and recreation – but ►

their supply and demand must be balanced to ensure that they remain available for both current and future generations.

To illustrate the importance of this resource, the total annual value of the environmental goods and services supplied by the natural resource base (as delineated in the EESMP) – excluding tourism – has been estimated at US \$453 million, about a quarter of the city’s municipal budget.

**Difficult challenges**

Given the importance of the natural resource base to Durban’s sustainability, much attention is being paid to ensuring the EESMP’s successful implementation. One of the most difficult challenges is that most of the environmentally sensitive land in the city is privately owned. Tools have been developed – or are under development – to secure the benefits from the city’s natural assets, while facilitating much needed development. Over the past three financial years, for example, limited funds have been allocated to acquire land in circumstances where regulating development would mean an almost total loss of economic return. This is not the preferred approach (because of the cost of land and subsequent management responsibilities) and is only used in threatened priority areas, and where there are no other options for protecting the land.

Another tool that has been employed successfully is using conservation servitudes registered in favour of the municipality to protect the environmentally sensitive parts of a property. These remain in the ownership of the titleholder, but are protected, and may only be used for conservation or passive recreation purposes. Property taxes can also be used as an incentive to encourage development in appropriate places. At present, vacant city land attracts the highest taxes, providing an incentive to develop it regardless of its qualities, at times leading to environmentally unacceptable development. Investigations are well advanced into mechanisms for offering meaningful and binding tax incentives to landowners to retain and manage land of the highest environmental quality – while having little impact on the City’s rates base.

**Natural environment**

Work is also under way on using the socio-economic benefits that flow from sustainably protecting and managing the natural resource base. Durban’s municipal area includes large tracts of rural land: its communities are almost completely dependent on the goods and services provided by the natural environment for products such as fuelwood, water, building materials, productive grazing and agricultural land and

craft materials. These areas offer a range of opportunities including:

- Providing goods and services important for the sustainable livelihoods and the well-being of local residents;
- Local economic development opportunities associated with the supply of unique natural products and services, such as water and land-based eco-tourism and craftwork;
- Providing services that benefit a much wider population, such as water resource protection – which benefits most of the people of the eThekweni Municipality.

**Future beneficiaries**

A coordinated management system is being developed to ensure that these opportunities are protected and used sustainably; through it, job creation for poor and disadvantaged communities and environmental management will proceed hand-in-hand. This will ensure that present benefits to people and the economy are secured, and maximised for both current and future beneficiaries.

By adopting this kind of proactive approach, eThekweni Municipality has established itself as a global leader in natural resource management, providing clear evidence that local action is essential to responding to the challenges of the MDGs ■

*Obed Mlaba is mayor of Durban*

Gibbery/UNEP/Still Pictures

