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Navigating

THE TREACHEROUS WATERS AHEAD

This week Gauteng premier David Makhura delivered what was arguably his most consequential state of the province address since assuming office almost seven years ago. The prevailing socioeconomic conditions teed up an array of competing political interests and contradictory narratives that sprinted to early, but ephemeral, leads over the facts.

The coronavirus pandemic has revealed the best and worst in humanity. Gauteng's plans to reposition its and South Africa's economy into a globally competitive one rest squarely on its ability to reimagine itself and deliver beyond the prevailing constraints. This demands bold, imaginative and decisive leadership by those entrusted with stewardship for our common good and national interests.

A year ago, Makhura delivered his annual provincial statement of intent. In that address, he made a plethora of undertakings. These - clustered in what he termed the "seven key priorities" for his administration:

- expanding the auto manufacturing base in the province;
- investing in public infrastructure development;
- redeveloping and retooling 15 industrial parks scattered across the province;
- developing the biggest inland logistics hub and dry port in Africa - the Transnet Tambo-Springs Logistics Gateway;
- investing in rail infrastructure, including expanding the Gautrain rapid transit system further westwards and creating intermodal transport infrastructure which would ensure that commuters could use a seamless transit system (buses, trains and taxis);
- enhancing technology diffusion and economic growth through investments in the digital economy; and
- expanding public education, health and housing infrastructure, including the establishment of a smart city in the Lanseria area.

What Makhura could not have anticipated at the time was the national shutdown of the country as government agonised over ways to mitigate the Covid-19 onslaught. The provincial government, like all administrations globally, was compelled to revise its annual plans and reprioritise resource allocations in favour of areas where these were most needed. Thus, understandably, the interplay between the demands of implementing his plans and the vagaries of leadership during a pandemic would determine the extent to which success could be achieved.

Pilot Makhura was forced by circumstances to fix the aircraft engine mid-flight and this is how his administration's original priorities were readjusted.

In his address, the premier stressed the "need to stop thinking that we'll return to the old ways of doing things". He added: "We have to build pandemic-proof and disaster-ready institutions and systems as we embrace 'the new normal'".

"Firstly, [we have to win] the battle against the Covid-19 pandemic and build resilient institutional and societal capacity to deal effectively with any future pandemics and disasters in the Gauteng city region.

"Secondly, reignite the Gauteng economy to take a lead in South Africa's economic reconstruction and recovery plan, as well as Africa's industrialisation agenda.

"Thirdly, recalibrate social policy to improve educational and health outcomes, fight crime and protect the most vulnerable sections of the



IMAGINATIVE? Gauteng premier David Makhura delivered his state of the province address this week

PHOTO: GALLO IMAGES

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94 839

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population against urban poverty and hunger.

"Lastly, improve governance across the Gauteng city region to focus on delivering results and improving the quality of life of residents, as well as enhancing ethics, integrity and accountability."

When he took to the podium this year, Makhura could claim a measure of success for his administration - with good reason.

There is no doubt that the fight against the coronavirus had to assume top priority for Makhura, as was the case for administrations globally. Not only did the pandemic cause major economic disruptions and hardships for South Africa's largest provincial economy, but it resulted in untold destruction of lives and livelihoods.

Although the most populous province (but the smallest by land mass) in the country, Gauteng was found by Stats SA to register the lowest number of per-capita coronavirus cases. This is a significant feather in Makhura's cap.

The interplay between the need to mitigate the spread of the virus while ensuring minimal disruptions in the education system is another

area in which Gauteng excelled.

Most parents of school-going children, including this writer, were highly apprehensive about the wisdom of the Makhura administration's decision to resume physical attendance of classes in the midst of a pandemic.

In following the science and implementing the requisite risk mitigation strategies, Makhura and education MEC Panyaza Lesufi now stand vindicated in their bold, but well-considered management of the provincial basic education system.

Gauteng has recorded the second-best national senior examination results, including having seven of its school districts among the 10 top-performing districts nationally.

It is also pleasing to learn that over 10 000 classrooms were ICT-enabled and 220 000 laptops and tablets were distributed to educators and pupils during 2020.

Although Gauteng had already started rolling out digital devices in the education system before the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, the need to

implement distance learning certainly helped to fast-track the initiative.

In addition, Makhura reported that Gauteng's "Tshepo 1 Million programme created opportunities for 94 839 young people for formal placement in jobs, internships, learnerships and business opportunities".

Perhaps - and second only to mitigating the spread of the Covid-19 virus - Makhura's most significant achievement was the successful launch of the Tshwane Automotive Special Economic Zone (Tasez). This multibillion-rand public-private partnership with the Ford Group will strengthen Gauteng as the premier manufacturer and exporter of motor vehicles in Africa. The zone is one of three Gauteng city regions earmarked for implementation by 2025.

It is a pity that the Gauteng Enterprise Propeller, whose mandate is to provide financial and nonfinancial support to small businesses and entrepreneurs, seems to be completely ignored in the special economic zone planning and framework. Perhaps Makhura has a cogent reason for duplicating competencies and mandates between the propeller and the Tasez.

Key to facilitating the movement of goods out of these special economic zones is the planned Gauteng-Eastern Cape freight rail corridor.

It is therefore a pity that Makhura did not provide any progress report on this initiative. He also failed to clarify reports about the suspension of the Gautrain network expansion or mention the contentious electronic tollgate system whose model Minister of Finance Tito Mboweni has insisted will not be abandoned. This is notwithstanding Makhura's assertions a few years ago that e-tolls would cease to exist, at least in Gauteng.

Despite the many years of promises, technology diffusion - a key element in ensuring global competitiveness - has lagged woefully. Access to affordable information communication technologies is as elusive as an effective cure for the coronavirus. Townships, peri-urban and rural

areas - potentially Cinderellas in our quest for global competitiveness - remain largely overlooked.

One of the key highlights of Makhura's address came

when he reaffirmed "the need for a caring, capable, competent and ethical government that can deal with developmental imperatives, especially during pandemics, natural disasters and systemic crises".

It is a shame that while many do not doubt Makhura's commitment to providing ethical leadership, he has been failed by certain key people whose lack of integrity caused procurement irregularities and untold embarrassment to him.

On the other hand, it is encouraging that Makhura acted boldly and decisively in pursuing clean governance in his administration.

We are obliged to cut Makhura some slack for 2020 and he can therefore rightly claim some measure of success. Much depends on how he navigates the treacherous waters that lie ahead. And the jury is out.

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