

CASE STUDY

How eThekwin Municipality sparked a data strategy community of practice that rippled across the country





Municipalities are often the closest sphere of government to residents, responsible for many of the services people rely on every day. Yet many continue to manage data in fragmented and reactive ways. Customer records are scattered across incompatible platforms, asset information is buried in static spreadsheets, and officials are often forced to rely on manual processes, emails or printed documents to access basic information. Without a clear data strategy, agreed standards, defined ownership or leadership buy-in, information is collected inconsistently, data sharing remains uneven across the organisation, and decisions remain driven by anecdote rather than evidence.

Meaningful progress in municipal data and digital transformation is possible, but not through isolated tools alone. Sustainable change requires investment in the institutional conditions that allow data to be owned, governed, shared and used in practice. The UKFCDO's Urban Resilience Programme centred on this premise and partnered with the Cities of Cape Town and Durban (eThekweni) in South Africa to achieve this institutional reform. In eThekweni, stakeholders made the important strategic decision to include all surrounding districts and local municipalities in the data governance reform journey of the Metro. MijiBora emerged from this collaborative learning journey as a structured approach to building municipal data capability, combining data strategies, practical use cases, peer learning, advisory support and toolkits to help municipalities move towards more structured, data-driven governance.

Approach

MijiBora combined peer learning with technical assistance, to encourage eThekweni Municipality and 6 neighbouring districts and local municipalities to work together to achieve data governance objectives such as:

- Writing a data strategy,
- Developing a data working group,
- Identifying a chief data officer and other custodians and champions,
- Identifying foundational datasets and developing data catalogues,
- Working on unified views and interoperability,
- 'Pitching' to investors and partnership building

A toolkit was developed as a starting point for these organisations, based largely off of the City of Cape Town's data strategy, as well as the UK GDS's open principles and other global best practice. Armed with the toolkit, municipalities came together quarterly over 18 months to share progress towards their milestones. Over this time 2 other metros and 1 additional secondary city joined the community of practice.



What MijiBora helped make possible

During the programme, seven of the nine participating municipalities produced or enhanced draft data strategies, with two already adopted. Several municipalities also instituted Data Working Groups, signalling the sustainability and long-term ambitions for this work moving forward.

The ability of these municipalities to move from “uncertainty” to “nascent strategy” in a few months represents important early success. This was not achieved through expensive external consultancies writing strategies on behalf of municipalities. It was achieved through a high-leverage combination of structured guidance, peer learning and tailored advisory support. By empowering local teams to lead their own design, the programme helped ensure that the outputs were internally owned mandates.



First things first, there is a vacuum. There is a vacuum of direction. So we need the strategy to become a compass, to say, in addressing, in appreciating our corporate data assets, in elevating data not to become a by-product, but to become an asset. That is decision-making. We need something to guide the city. How to institutionalise best practice when coming to data collection, data processing, data analysis, data dissemination, data sharing.

— Tshwane District Municipality official

What MijiBora helped make possible

Overall, MijiBora catalysed the municipal digital ecosystem in three high-impact ways: structured knowledge exchange, embedded capacity, and ecosystem connectivity. Structured knowledge exchange meant building an impactful Community of Practice where municipalities could learn from one another's successes and failures. Embedded capacity meant using toolkits and shared resources to build institutional muscle that outlasts the programme. Ecosystem connectivity meant positioning local governments as active, capable participants in the wider national digital infrastructure.

This early momentum shows that when the right institutional levers are met with targeted support, municipalities can begin moving toward a more mature, interoperable and data-driven system of governance. It is our hope as implementers and as participating municipalities, that this programme is continued in KwaZulu-Natal and is replicated in other provinces. Creating institutional readiness for digital tools, including digital public infrastructure and AI, is necessary to provide every resident with effective basic services and improved quality of life.



The strategy has helped us come together and understand short falls. The use cases helped us make a breakthrough and assisted us to break silo walls.

— Ray Nkonyeni Municipality Official

MijiBora's capacity building approach

One of the important shifts through MijiBora was a broader understanding of capacity building.

Formal training remained important. Across more than 20 dedicated training sessions, the programme improved skills and confidence in using data and digital tools, with the majority of surveyed officials reporting enhanced capability. But training was only one part of the picture.

Use case participation: Capacity was also built through use case participation. Officials learned by doing, working through practical implementation challenges and building confidence in areas such as data visualisation, dashboarding and communicating data insights.



We had to quickly upskill in technical stuff., now we understand front end, back end, fig tree, ... all these things that we never knew before, ..., and I think the whole team does understand those things better, which is a good precursor to now having to do things ourselves, right?

— City of Cape Town official

MijiBora's capacity building approach

Peer Learning: MijiBora also built capacity through peer learning. Through in-person and virtual engagements, the Community of Practice created space for municipalities to share challenges, practical experiences and emerging solutions around data governance, digital systems and service delivery.



It's very interesting and informative to see how other municipalities tackle a similar problem and what solutions they come up with for consideration within your own environment. It's ..., resources are very scarce, so we're always looking for opportunities for synergies, rather than trying to recreate the wheel and utilise the limited resources that we have very sparingly.

— Nelson Mandela official

What MijiBora helped make possible

The MijiBora model integrated structured guidance and hands-on advisory support to bridge a critical capacity deficit: the gap between recognising the value of data and having the technical direction to act on it. This was achieved through a combination of coaching sessions, and provision of the data strategy toolkit.

The support offered through the programme helped resource-strapped municipalities transition from conceptual interest to the delivery of concrete data assets and policies: outcomes they would have struggled to achieve on their own.



What MijiBora helped make possible

In Tshwane, the internal team drafted a data strategy within just three months of joining the programme. Officials noted that without the “directional anchor” of the toolkit, they would have struggled to make such progress. Likewise, in Ray Nkonyeni and uMhlathuze, the Data Strategy Toolkit was viewed as a critical foundation in developing a draft data strategy. In Ray Nkonyeni, the toolkit was used as a base template, with sections allocated across a task team and refined through weekly meetings.

A Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality official described the practical value of toolkits in this way:



A strategy is very high level, but at some point, you've got to get down to the nuts and bolts of it, and that's where toolkits come in, because they tell you the 'how' of getting the task executed.

— Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality official

What MijiBora helped make possible

Taken together, these elements created a reinforcing ecosystem of support, where knowledge sharing, advisory input and the data strategy toolkit worked in tandem to build capacity and enable implementation. Questions that surfaced during the coaching sessions and peer learning sessions were fed into the data strategy toolkit for others to benefit from.



What MijiBora teaches us about sustained impact

As implementers, we are often asked what is required to turn prototypes into sustained tools with impact. MijiBora is one of the important positive outcomes of the Urban Resilience Programme. It shows that through a simple intervention centred on

- (1) applied & peer learning and
- (2) advisory support and toolkits

Municipalities can build the institutional conditions that allow data and digital tools to be owned, adopted, sustained and scaled by the people who understand their context best.

MijiBora reinforced the importance of municipal-led transformation. The officials working inside municipalities understand where data gets stuck, where processes break down, and what kinds of information are needed to make better decisions. The value of MijiBora was not in designing solutions around municipalities, but in creating the structure, tools and peer-learning space for officials to turn their own institutional knowledge into strategies, governance structures and practical next steps they could own.



What MijiBora teaches us about sustained impact

MijiBora shows the value of working across municipalities, not only within them. When municipalities learn together, use shared language, test practical approaches and build common foundations, they are better placed to participate in a more connected municipal data ecosystem. We saw how municipalities moved from uncertainty to self belief watching and listening to the journeys of their peers.

While many municipalities remain at an early stage of their data and digital maturity journeys, there is clear evidence that MijiBora helped translate learning into action, supporting municipalities to take concrete steps toward more structured, data-driven approaches to governance and service delivery.

The progress is still early, and municipalities are moving at different paces. But the lesson is clear: when municipal expertise is met with targeted support, municipalities can begin to bridge the capacity gap and move toward a more mature, interoperable and data-driven system of governance. What started with 2 metros and 2 data strategies, thanks to eThekwini's collaborative mindset, ended with 7 municipalities, 5 metros and 6 additional data strategies.





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