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Article

Strategic planning for local economic development: A case of Nkomazi local municipality, South Africa

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Abstract: Strategic planning plays a critical role in helping regions and municipalities achieve sustainable local economic growth. It gives local government and development partners a clear vision and practical roadmap for activities. This paper explores the strategic objectives of Nkomazi Local Municipality with the aim to identify the gaps in the strategic planning framework and provide suggestions for Improvement. This study employed a qualitative case study design, analysing official documents, including the Nkomazi IDP (2022–2027), MEC review comments, and relevant policy frameworks. The integration of multiple data sources such as IDP, SWOT analysis, KPAs, and strategic objectives provide a comprehensive overview. Data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns, gaps, and opportunities in the strategic planning framework. The analysis reveals that Nkomazi Local Municipality has made important strides in shaping its strategic direction, but further progress will depend on continued focus in several key areas like economic diversification and skills development. The SWOT analysis shows that Nkomazi has considerable strengths and opportunities, from its fertile land and a strategic location to supportive governance structures and planned investments like the SEZ. However, it also faces serious weaknesses and threats which include human capacity gaps, financial constraints, service backlogs, and socio-economic challenges like unemployment and rapid population growth. To build a more resilient local economy, the municipality should consider placing more focus on long-term infrastructure and service delivery; incorporating the District Disaster Management Plan to strengthen the municipal ability to respond to environmental threats. Ultimately, fostering an effective strategic planning will help Nkomazi realise its vision of empowered communities enjoying quality services, inclusive economic growth, and contributing to broader regional development goals for Mpumalanga Province and entire South Africa. The policy implications of this study suggest that local governments must prioritize collaborative efforts with stakeholders at all levels.

Keywords: strategic planning; local economic development (LED); municipality; SWOT analysis; integrated development plan (IDP)

1. Introduction

Strategic planning is a systematic process through which an organization, government, or institution defines its long-term goals, sets priorities, and determines the most effective allocation of resources to achieve these objectives [1]. It involves assessing internal and external environments, identifying opportunities and challenges, and developing actionable strategies to drive sustainable development. According to [2], strategic planning is a formalized process to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an entity is, what it does, and why it does it, with a focus on the future. This approach ensures that initiatives are proactive rather than

reactive and aligns various stakeholders towards a common vision for economic progress.

Phan et al. [3] aver that strategic planning play a critical role in helping regions and municipalities achieve sustainable local economic growth. It gives local government and development partners a clear vision and practical roadmap for activities. This clarity helps align departments, businesses, and communities around common goals, reducing confusion and duplication of efforts. It also allows municipalities to manage their limited financial and human resources more effectively by focusing on the most pressing development needs [4]. One of the most important aspects of strategic planning is that it promotes inclusive development. By involving different community groups, especially, those that are often left out, such as informal traders or rural communities, municipalities can design development plans that are fairer and more responsive to real needs [5].

Strategic planning also helps integrate various policy areas like housing, land use, infrastructure, and education so that these elements support each other instead of operating in silos [6]. With clearly defined goals and timelines, municipalities can monitor progress, identify challenges early, and make necessary changes to stay on track [7]. In addition, having a proper strategic plan in place builds trust with investors and development partners by showing that the municipality is forward-thinking and organised [8]. This can attract much needed investment and support for infrastructure and job creation. The planning process also helps municipal officials improve their skills in data analysis, stakeholder engagement, and long-term decision-making [9]. In short, strategic planning is more than just a paperwork exercise, it is a tool for driving inclusive, accountable, and long-lasting economic development that benefits everyone in the community.

This paper explores the strategic objectives of Nkomazi Local Municipality with the aim to identify the gaps in the strategic planning framework and provide suggestions for Improvement. The analysis draws on relevant scholarly and policy literature to map out emerging trends, structural challenges, and institutional responses related to strategic planning. By highlighting successful case studies and innovative practices, the research seeks to provide actionable recommendations for policymakers. Ultimately, fostering an effective strategic planning will help Nkomazi realise its vision of empowered communities enjoying quality services, inclusive economic growth, and contributing to broader regional development goals for Mpumalanga Province and entire South Africa.

2. Materials and methods

This study employed a qualitative case study design, analysing official documents, including the Nkomazi IDP (2022–2027), MEC review comments, and relevant policy frameworks. The study relies primarily on official documents and secondary sources. The integration of multiple data sources such as IDP, SWOT analysis, KPAs, and strategic objectives provide a comprehensive overview. Document analysis is valuable in a proper research setting.

To conduct this research, five steps were followed:

i. A case was selected

ii. Document selection
iii. Analysis of document
iv. SWOT analysis
v. Discussion of analysis.

Nkomazi Local Municipality was selected based on its strong and dedicated policy on integrated development plan (IDP). Also, the municipal is one of the leading Local Municipality that empowers its communities through excellent service delivery. Nkomazi Local Municipality policy documents that are related strategic plans towards local economic development (LED), and integrated development plans (IDP) were selected and analysed. The SWOT analysis was used to analyse the policy documents.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns, gaps, and opportunities in the strategic planning framework.

3. Conceptual background on strategic planning

3.1. National perspective on strategic planning

At the national level, strategic planning is essential for setting macroeconomic policies that drive economic growth, stability, and development. In South Africa, for example, the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 serves as a strategic blueprint to address socio-economic challenges such as poverty, inequality, and unemployment [10]. NDP outlines key priorities, which include job creation, infrastructure development, and sustainability, aligning with global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In addition, strategic planning at the national level ensures policy alignment and promotes public-private partnerships (PPPs) to enhance competitiveness and attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) [11,12]. The South African government also implements sector-specific strategic plans, such as the Industrial Policy Action Plan (IPAP) and National Infrastructure Plan, to stimulate industrial growth and infrastructure development.

3.2. Provincial perspective on strategic planning

At the provincial level, strategic planning translates national priorities into region-specific development initiatives. Provinces such as Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Western Cape, and Mpumalanga develop Provincial Growth and Development Strategies (PGDS) to guide economic development efforts in alignment with national policies. The Gauteng Growth and Development Strategy (GGDS), for instance, focuses on infrastructure investment, innovation, and regional economic integration [13]. Similarly, the Mpumalanga Provincial Growth and Development Strategy (MPGDS) prioritizes the diversification of the industrial sector, expansion of the agricultural sector, and sustainable tourism development, leveraging the province's rich natural resources and biodiversity to help drive economic growth [14].

3.3. Local perspective on strategic planning

At the local level, municipalities and metro councils develop integrated development plans (IDPs) as part of their strategic planning processes. The IDPs serve as their five-year development frameworks that guide local government actions and

service delivery. According to the Municipal Systems Act (No. 32 of 2000), IDPs must align with provincial and national policies, while addressing the unique needs of local communities [4,14]. In order for an economy to remain resilient, inclusive, and sustainable, strategic planning at the local level is essential, as stated by Guyadeen et al. [4]. The IDP is the municipality's primary strategic planning document, but strategic planning is a broader process. The municipalities focus on spatial planning, infrastructure expansion, and supporting Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) to drive local economic growth [4]. Furthermore, partnerships with private sector institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are encouraged in order to strengthen service delivery and investment attraction.

4. Nkomazi local municipality profile

Nkomazi Local Municipality is situated in the Ehlanzeni District of Mpumalanga Province, strategically positioned along the Maputo Corridor, which links South Africa to Mozambique and eSwatini. The municipality spans approximately 4787 square kilometres and shares borders with Mozambique to the east, eSwatini to the south, the Kruger National Park to the north, and the City of Mbombela to the west [15]. The local municipality comprises of both urban and extensive rural settlements, divided into 33 wards, which include several small towns and large village areas. **Figure 1** showcases Nkomazi local municipality location.

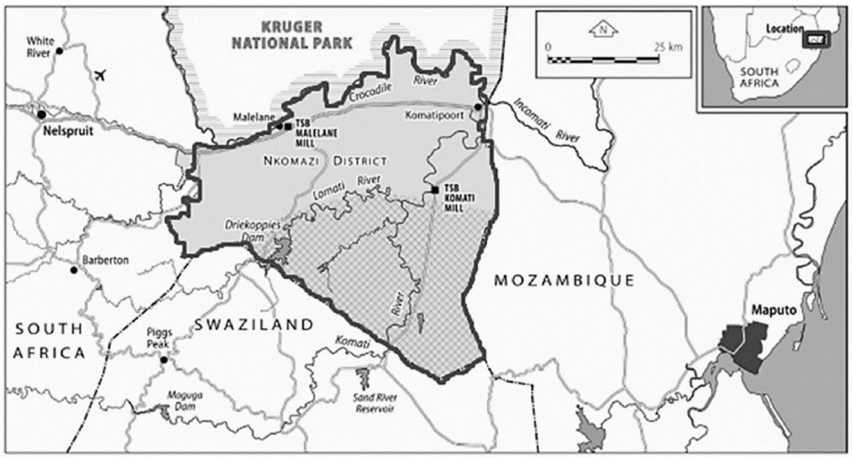

Figure 1. Nkomazi local municipality; Source: Nkomazi Local Municipality [15].

The combination of urban and tribal communities necessitates that Nkomazi's administration and development plans address the needs of both urban inhabitants and rural village populations. Nkomazi is among the more populated local municipalities in Mpumalanga. The most recent Integrated Development Plan (IDP) data indicates that Nkomazi's population was around 410,830 in 2021 [16]. This shows an increase in the population from 393,030 in 2011 to 410,907 in 2016. The population saw an estimated annual growth rate of 1 % between 2011 and 2016 according to [17]. Growth is propelled by a comparatively elevated birth rate and substantial in-migration.

The IDP notes that Nkomazi is experiencing a substantial and uncontrollable influx of persons from the bordering countries of Mozambique and eSwatini. This is attributed to South Africa's strong economy drawing migrants seeking opportunities.

The municipality possesses a youthful demographic composition; yet it encounters demand to enhance services and infrastructure to accommodate the increasing population. A growing population, although providing a more extensive labour pool, nevertheless exerts pressure on resources when income and employment generation fail to align [15]. According to the [15], the municipality's demographic profile indicates a significant dependency ratio, widespread of poverty, and social challenges, including a high prevalence of HIV / AIDS, which is recognised as a threat in the municipality's SWOT analysis.

4.1. Economic environment and key activities

The economy of Nkomazi is mostly agricultural, with significant contributions from tourism and mining activities. Oguttu et al. [16] note that the main economic sectors in Nkomazi are agriculture, mining, and tourism, concentrated around towns like Komatipoort, Marloth Park, Kamhlushwa, and Malalane. Large agricultural business firms operate in the area, taking advantage of irrigation from the Komati and Crocodile rivers. The strong agricultural base is reflected in plans for agro-processing industries. In fact, Nkomazi has been earmarked for a new Special Economic Zone (SEZ) focused on agro processing, indicating the value of agriculture to the local economy. According to David et al. [17], tourism constitutes an additional component of Nkomazi's economy. It is proximity to Kruger National Park and the N4 highway establishes it as a tourism gateway. The attractions are the Marloth Park animal reserve, cultural heritage sites, and cross-border tourism with Mozambique and eSwatini.

Tourism contributes through game lodges, guesthouses, and related services, particularly around Komatipoort which is a popular entry to Kruger and Mozambique and Malalane [16]. Mining is a smaller but significant part of the local economy. While Nkomazi is not rich in mineral resources compared to other regions of Mpumalanga, there are some mining and quarrying activities, such as sand mining and stone quarries, and small-scale mining of minerals. However, the municipality is primarily agricultural in nature as the IDP itself states that Nkomazi Municipality is more of an agricultural economy, with other sectors complementing this core.

The region also supports subtropical fruit farming such as bananas, mangoes, litchis, and avocados as well as winter vegetable production, benefiting from its fertile soils and favourable climate [18]. Additionally, eco-tourism plays a role in the local economy due to the proximity to the Kruger National Park, which attracts both domestic and international visitors [19]. Given Nkomazi's strategic location along the N4 national highway, which connects Johannesburg with Maputo, Nkomazi has an advantageous position for trade, logistics, and transport-related industries [20]. According to Integrated Urban Development Forum [19], the railway line has potential to further enhances its role in cross-border trade and investment.

4.2. Contribution to local economic development (LED)

The Nkomazi Local Municipality Integrated Development Plan (IDP) 2022–2027 sets out a vision for sustainable socio-economic development, focusing on service delivery and economic empowerment [18]. **Table 1** below depicts the strategic objectives of the Nkomazi Local Municipality's IDP [15].

Table 1. Strategic objectives and key focus areas.

No.	Strategic objective	Key focus area
1	Economic development	–Enhancing agricultural productivity to sustain economic growth. –Promoting tourism as a diver of job creation and revenue generation. –Supporting small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) to diversify the local economy.
2	Infrastructure development	–Upgrading and maintaining roads, water, and sanitation infrastructure to support business activities and improve residents' quality of life. –Expanding electricity access, particularly areas.
3	Social development	–Improving access to education, healthcare, and social services to uplift communities. –Developing youth and skills training programs to enhance employability and entrepreneurship.
4	Good governance and institutional development	–Improving governance and transparency to enhance municipal service delivery. –Encouraging community participation in decision-making processes.
5	Environmental management	–Strengthening financial management and accountability to ensure sustainable municipal operations. –Ensuring sustainable resource use by promoting conservation efforts. –Developing policies to manage waste and pollution effectively.

Source: Adapted from Nkomazi Local Municipality [15].

4.3. Nkomazi local municipality vison, mission and strategic objectives

The Nkomazi Local Municipality's IDP outlines its vision, mission and strategic objectives which are intended to drive all the development initiatives within the municipality. These serve as the foundation of the municipality's strategic planning framework, providing a specific sense of direction and purpose. The Nkomazi Municipality [15] states that the vision of Nkomazi is to be a leading Local Municipality that empowers its communities through excellent service delivery. This vision presents an optimistic picture of Nkomazi as a leader in local administration, where excellent municipal services enhance the well-being of the population. It emphasizes community empowerment and excellent service delivery, indicating economic prosperity as well as social development and effective governance.

In support of this vision, the Nkomazi IDP also defines the municipality's mission [15] The mission statement declares that the Nkomazi Local Municipality is committed to strengthening the quality of life of all the communities in the Nkomazi area through rendering efficient and cost-effective basic services that aligned with the principles of sustainable development. Furthermore, the Nkomazi Local Municipality also has core values which are intended to guide how the municipality will pursue and implement its mission. The IDP outlines core values which include accountability, good governance, transparency, integrity, and responsiveness [15] These specific values are key in creating a conducive environment for development. The Nkomazi's IDP translates its vision and mission into a set of strategic objectives and development goals, which are often aligned with the six key performance areas (KPAs) common to South African municipalities. The strategic objectives are summarized by the municipality's development goals under each KPA. **Table 2** outlines the KPAs and goals, respectively.

These strategic objectives are aligned with national development priorities. For instance, basic services and infrastructure (Goal 2) is crucial, given Nkomazi's backlog in services for some rural areas. Local Economic Development (Goal 3) is directly aimed at reducing unemployment and poverty by creating jobs, which resonates with the mission of enhancing quality of life [21]. To focus efforts, the

Nkomazi IDP also lists Top Ten Municipal Priorities for 2022–2027, which encapsulate the pressing development areas. Nkomazi Local Municipality [15] highlights the following priority issues: (1) Water and Sanitation, (2) Roads and Storm Water, (3) Local Economic Development and Job Creation, (4) Waste Management, (5) Electricity, (6) Community Facilities, (7) Health and Social Services, (8) Education, (9) Human Settlements, and (10) Crime Prevention.

Table 2. Nkomazi KPA and goals.

No.	KPA	GOAL
1	KPA 1: Municipal Transformation and Institutional Development.	Goal 1: Improve organizational cohesion and effectiveness as well as capacity building.
2	KPA 2: Basic Service Delivery.	Goal 2: improve access to service delivery, build sustainable infrastructure and ensure proper operations and maintenance.
3	KPA 3: Local Economic Development (LED) & Social Development.	Goal 3: Create an environment that promotes the development of the local economy and facilitate job creation.
4	KPA 4: Municipal Financial Viability & Management.	Goal 4: improve overall financial management, develop and implement appropriate financial management policies, procedures, and systems.
5	KPA 5: Good Governance & Public Participation.	Goal 5: Promote a culture of participatory and good governance.
6	KPA 6: Cross Cutting.	Goal 6: Provision of access to land and sustainable development.

Source: Adapted from Nkomazi Municipality IDP Integrated Development Plan 2023–2028 [18].

This list, drawn from community inputs and analysis, indicates that basic infrastructure water, roads, electricity) and social services are at the forefront, alongside economic growth, and safety. Each of these priorities' ties back to the broader strategic objectives for example, water, roads, electricity fall under basic service delivery; health, education under social development; crime prevention under good governance and safety. Furthermore, the IDP contains specific strategies and programs under each strategic objective [21,22]. For example, under Local Economic Development, strategies include developing a local economic development strategy, promoting a special economic zone, focusing on enterprise development, and attracting investment. **Table 3** displays Nkomazi Local Municipality SWOT analysis.

5. Results: SWOT analysis of nkomazi local municipality

A SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) provides a concise overview of the internal and external factors influencing development [23]. The following SWOT analysis of Nkomazi Local Municipality identifies the key aspects that are specific to the local municipality:

5.1. Strengths

Nkomazi Local Municipality is bestowed with a range of strengths that form a solid foundation for socio-economic development and service delivery improvement. The Municipality has displayed an improvement in its institutional capacity and its administrative capacity in recent years. To date many managerial positions are filled with qualified, skilled people, and there's ongoing skills development for staff. This strong human capital in the administration means the municipality is better equipped

to plan and deliver services [15]. Furthermore, the municipality has basic service provision ability: It has the ability and experience to provide basic services such as water, electricity, etc. to communities, as highlighted in Nkomazi Local Municipality [15]. Infrastructure networks exist in much of the area, forming a platform to build on for further development. The presence of planning tools like the IDP, SDF, etc. and commitment to following them is a strength that guides development coherently. It has political support from Council and traditional leaders, which can be a strength in mobilizing community participation [3]. In addition, the municipality also displays improved cooperation with traditional authorities and community structures, helping align development efforts at the grassroots.

Table 3. Nkomazi local municipality SWOT analysis.

Strengths	**Weaknesses**
-Improved institutional capacity to operate as a Municipality	-Insufficient office space
-Ability and capacity to provide communities with basic services	- Insufficient skilled human resource at the operational level
-Capacity to formulate and implement policies	-Budgetary constraints
-Vastly improved administration of the Municipality	-Ward committees not fully capacitated to participate in the development planning and lack of meaningful participation
-Managerial positions filled with qualified and skilled people	-Inadequate managerial
-Successful skills training plan implemented through the workplace skills plan	-Control, measuring coordination, response, integration, intra and inter the department
Opportunities	**Treats**
-Potential increase in tax income base	-Huge and uncontrollable influx of immigration from neighbouring countries (Swaziland and Mozambique)
-Geographical location in respect to the Maputo development corridor	-Rural sprawls
-Potential for economic growth through the exploitation of the high agricultural potential if the area	-High HIV-AIDS Impact
-Improved cooperation between the Municipality and traditional leaders and other communities structures	-Spiralling unemployment rate – Distance between urban economic centres and rural settlements.
-Tourism and cultural aspects of the area existence of railway infrastructure	-High rate of illiteracy
MIG by National Treasure	-Aging infrastructure
-Collaboration with chambers	-Climate change

Source: Adapted from Nkomazi local Municipality [15].

5.2. Weaknesses

Despite having various strengths, Nkomazi Local Municipality also faces several internal weaknesses that hinder its ability to deliver services effectively and meet its developmental objectives. The municipality faces limited skilled personnel at operational levels: Though the top management team in this local municipality is regarded to be strong as stated by Nkomazi local Municipality [15], an insufficient skills base exists within the operational staff in certain departments. This gap has potential to hinder service delivery and project implementation at ground level. Furthermore, the municipality has displayed challenges relating to budget constraints

[17]. It is still facing significant challenges with budget constraints, which continue to limit its developmental and operational capacity. Oguttu [16] highlight that this persistent financial limitation adversely impacts both the pace and scale at which planned development initiatives can be implemented. Inadequate office infrastructure is highlighted as one of the weaknesses possessed by this municipality [15]. There are internal challenges in management control and inter-departmental coordination. the silos working mentality between departments have been identified as a challenge that has negative impacts on integrated service delivery. Several departments may not coordinate when planning and executing specific projects or processes, resulting in duplication or delays [15].

5.3. Opportunities

de Beer and Arkwright [24] highlight that Nkomazi's geographic position along the Maputo Corridor presents a significant opportunity for regional economic development within this municipality. The location of the rail link as well as the N4 highway offers potential for expanding trade, establishing logistics businesses, and promoting transit-oriented development. According to Rekiso [25] the regional integration within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) is growing. Since Nkomazi is strategically positioned geographically, it stands to benefit from increasing cross-border commerce. As an additional opportunity, the municipality could leverage initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Agreement by positioning itself as a gateway for goods between South Africa and Mozambique [15]. Furthermore, Nkomazi's natural beauty and cultural heritage offer avenues for tourism development. The current existing developments, such as the God's Window Skywalk, and provincial plans to boost tourism in Mpumalanga further support Nkomazi's potential in this [15]. Finally, improved intergovernmental collaboration, including engagement with traditional leaders and support from district and provincial structures, offers a framework for aligning local projects with broader development strategies.

5.4. Threats

Nkomazi Local Municipality faces a range of socio-economic, environmental, and institutional threats that impact negatively on its ability to achieve its goals. Among the most pressing concerns are uncontrolled immigration and population pressure, persistently high unemployment and poverty levels, and the ongoing burden of disease, particularly HIV / AIDS [26,27] equitable service provision, widespread educational and skills gaps, deteriorating infrastructure, and increasing environmental risks linked to climate change [10,28]. These interrelated threats highlight the need for integrated planning and targeted policy responses to support inclusive and resilient development within the municipality. Climate change and environmental degradation have been recognised as escalating risks. According to Mpumalanga DARDLEA [28], the frequent droughts, floods, and extreme weather conditions pose great threat to Nkomazi's agriculture-dependent economy and to its critical infrastructure.

6. Discussion: Gaps in the strategic planning framework and suggestions for improvement

While Nkomazi's IDP and strategic framework are comprehensive, there are some gaps and challenges evident in the current strategic planning that need to be addressed to achieve better outcomes. Identifying these gaps is important for continuous improvement of the planning process and its implementation. Based on the IDP review and assessments, the following key gaps are identified with suggestions for improvement:

6.1. Integration of spatial planning and land use

The weak integration of the Spatial Development Framework (SDF) into the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) is a major key gap. The SDF does not present a clear long-term spatial vision. In addition, the strategies and proposals contained in the SDF were not properly summarised or reflected in the main IDP document. This creates a disconnect between land use planning and the overall development goals of the municipality [4]. Proper integration of spatial planning tools like the SDF into the IDP is essential for promoting spatial justice, sustainable development, and coordinated infrastructure investment [29].

6.2. Sector strategy updates (LED and others)

The IDP highlights that some of the municipality's key sector strategies, including the Local Economic Development (LED) strategy, are either outdated or still being developed. For example, the LED strategy is currently under review, while an Economic Recovery Plan is also in progress. This presents a challenge, because, without the updated and fully integrated strategies, the municipality may struggle to implement clear and practical action plans to drive economic recovery and take advantage of new development opportunities [30]. It is important that the updated LED strategy is finalised and properly aligned with the broader goals set out in the IDP. The strategy should clearly outline specific projects such as support for SMMEs, the development of agricultural hubs, and tourism promotion, along with clear timelines and assigned responsibilities [4]. To ensure the realistic of the strategies, it would also be beneficial to involve local business chambers and community stakeholders in the development process.

6.3. Infrastructure and service delivery planning

According to the MEC's review, the absence of a finalized service delivery master plan and proper maintenance plans, especially for critical infrastructure like roads and sanitation gaps that need attention. Although the IDP does list various infrastructure projects, it does not clearly present a full, long-term plan that links all these efforts together [5]. To address this, the municipality should consider placing more focus on long-term infrastructure and service delivery planning. A 5-year infrastructure rollout plans that include maintenance schedules, and condition assessments is recommended.

6.4. Financial strategy and resource mobilization

The financial strategy outlined in the IDP addresses municipal financial management; however, a key concern is the financial sustainability of all the planned projects. Given the high levels of poverty and limited revenue generated locally, many of the projects listed in the IDP rely heavily on external funding sources [31]. While grants such as the Municipal Infrastructure Grant (MIG) are mentioned, the IDP could be improved by clearly indicating how each priority project will be funded, instead of simply listing funding sources without detailed strategies [32]. Although the MEC did not raise any major concerns about financial viability, the municipality still faces genuine budgetary constraints. To strengthen the financial framework, the IDP should explore innovative funding approaches, such as public-private partnerships where private firms might assist with services like waste management or renewable energy in exchange for certain concessions [33]. The municipality could also follow the example of Tshwane municipality that introduced Medium-term Revenue and Expenditure Framework (MTREF). The MTREF adjustments featured 5 %, 8.8 % and10 % increase on property rate, electricity, and water respectively. The municipality could also tap into national or provincial economic recovery funds and enhance its internal revenue generation by revisiting service tariffs and expanding the property rate base where appropriate [34].

6.5. Human resource and organizational capacity

The MEC highlighted the absence of cascading the performance management system to lower-level staff, which undermines accountability and efficiency [30,35]. The municipality should prioritise the recruitment and training of professionals in areas, like, infrastructure engineering, local economic development, environmental management, and urban planning. Aggressive implementation of the Workplace Skills Plan, as requested by the MEC, is essential to upskill current employees and close technical gaps [35]. Strengthening the Project Management Unit (PMU) will also be critical to ensure that capital projects identified in the IDP are well-scoped, carefully planned, and closely monitored [8]. Investing in people and institutional capacity is therefore key to closing the gap between strategic planning and effective implementation.

6.6. Community participation and communication

One area that still needs improvement is the level and depth of community participation in both the planning and implementation of the IDP. Although the municipality does host public consultation forums, the MEC pointed out that Ward Operational Plans were not developed and that clear mechanisms for communicating council activities to the broader community are lacking. The WDP must have a distinct community profile, a targeted needs assessment, and a pragmatic implementation plan.

These fundamental factors ensure that local requirements are appropriately assessed and factored into larger municipal budgets. To strengthen participation, the municipality should consider developing Ward Development Plans for each ward. These plans would allow residents to identify and prioritise projects that respond to their local needs and feed directly into the broader IDP process [32]. Tools like

newsletters, an active and regularly updated municipal website, a Facebook page, and community feedback sessions can make a real difference [36].

6.7. Environmental planning and climate resilience

Another important gap in the strategic framework relates to environmental planning and climate resilience. Both the SWOT analysis and MEC comments highlight the need for improved environmental management and disaster preparedness. At present, Nkomazi does not have a dedicated environmental management unit. Meanwhile, a draft climate change adaptation strategy has been developed or allocated a budget. In light of increasing risks linked to climate change, this is a significant shortfall [37].

Following the example of EThekwini municipality (Climate Action Plan), which aim to achieve complete community resilience and net-zero emissions by 2050. The municipality should prioritise finalising and implementing the Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Strategy and ensure it is supported by a clear budget in the next IDP review [38]. Incorporating the District Disaster Management Plan and District Rural Development Plan, as recommended by the MEC, will help Nkomazi align with regional strategies and strengthen its ability to respond to environmental threats. Addressing these gaps now will not only safeguard the municipality's development gains but also build long-term resilience for communities.

6.8. Monitoring and evaluation

One of the common challenges facing many strategic plans, including Nkomazi's, is the lack of strong monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems. Although the IDP outlines various targets and indicators, the actual implementation of projects can fall short if there is no proper mechanism in place to track progress consistently [32]. A key issue is that the performance management system has not been fully cascaded down to all departments and staff levels, which weakens accountability. Each unit needs to clearly understand their responsibilities in delivering on the IDP, and there must be a culture of tracking and reporting performance [39]. The City of Johannesburg's Group M&E Framework is an excellent real-world example to imitate. The framework aligns internal divisions and municipal entities around certain service delivery standards.

To address this, the municipality should strengthen its M&E framework by introducing a structured schedule for quarterly and annual IDP reviews. A simple but effective dashboard of key indicators such as the number of households connected to water, kilometres of road constructed, or jobs created through local economic development projects can help managers and councillors keep a close look on the progress [40]. Where targets are not being met, the system should allow for immediate corrective action or adjustments to the plan. Community involvement in monitoring can also be valuable; tools like social audits and citizen feedback surveys can provide insights into whether services are reaching people effectively. This will promote transparency and also build trust with the public.

7. Conclusions

Nkomazi Local Municipality has made important strides in shaping its strategic direction, but further progress will depend on continued focus in several key areas. One of the most important is economic diversification and skills development. At present, Nkomazi relies heavily on agriculture and government services, both of which are vulnerable to seasonal shifts and external pressures like climate change [16]. To build a more resilient local economy, the municipality should continue advancing initiatives such as the Special Economic Zone (SEZ), while also supporting small businesses in sectors like retail, tourism services, manufacturing, and craftsmanship [4]. Promoting entrepreneurship and broadening the economic base will make the municipality less dependent on a few sectors. This should go hand in hand with efforts to strengthen local skills. By partnering with institutions like the University of Mpumalanga or local Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, the municipality can introduce targeted training in fields like hospitality, construction, and agro processing [6]. These programmes will prepare the youth and unemployed residents for work opportunities linked to planned projects and will also attract investment by offering a skilled local labour force.

The SWOT analysis shows that Nkomazi has considerable strengths and opportunities. From its fertile land and a strategic location to supportive governance structures and planned investments like the SEZ. However, it also faces serious weaknesses and threats which include human capacity gaps, financial constraints, service backlogs, and socio-economic challenges like unemployment and rapid population growth. The strategic plan (IDP) of Nkomazi is essentially about leveraging the strengths/opportunities (e.g., using the SEZ to create jobs, or using political support to drive community projects) while addressing or mitigating the weaknesses/threats (e.g., training staff to improve capacity, seeking more funding for infrastructure, implementing HIV/AIDS programs, etc.). The SWOT thus provides a critical reality check that underpins Nkomazi's strategic planning. It identifies where the municipality must focus internal improvements and what external factors to prepare for or exploit.

The strategic planning process in Nkomazi offers a solid platform for long-term local and regional development. The IDP clearly outlines a vision and set of objectives aimed at uplifting communities and creating economic opportunity. However, translating these plans into results requires ongoing effort strengthening alignment across plans, engaging communities, building internal capacity, diversifying the economy, and closely tracking delivery. This study concludes that effective strategic planning will help Nkomazi realise its vision of empowered communities enjoying quality services, inclusive economic growth, and contributing to broader regional development goals for Mpumalanga and South Africa.

The policy implications of this study suggest that local governments must prioritize collaborative efforts with stakeholders at all levels. By fostering partnerships and encouraging community participation, local governments can enhance accountability and ensure that resources are allocated effectively, ultimately leading to sustained development and improved living standards for residents. This study advances the existing literature on strategic planning and local economic development

by providing practical insights and recommendations tailored to the unique challenges faced by Nkomazi.

8. Limitations and future research

There is a number of important limitations to this study:

1. The study relies primarily on official documents and secondary sources, no primary data was collected; therefore, there is a risk for a certain interpretation which might in turn lead to an interpretative bias in the final research results.

2. The study is a case study of Nkomazi Local Municipality; the results of the analysis might not be generic or applicable to some municipalities.

3. The SWOT analysis is adapted from the municipality's documents, so, it is the municipality's self-assessment of its strengths and weaknesses, therefore, it would be difficult to determine whose perspectives are represented in the SWOT.

Future research based on interviews or survey analysis could further explore the impact of community engagement on the success of these strategic initiatives, ensuring that all voices are heard in the development process.

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