

opinion & analysis

The Herald
Editorial Comment

When calling an ambulance becomes a gamble

Three broken ambulances. Two left standing. And a community being asked to gamble with its life while the Eastern Cape health department works on its turnaround times. One damning measure of a health system is the time an ill person must wait for help. In Humansdorp, people are waiting hours and, in some cases, even days for an ambulance. Three of the five ambulances assigned to Humansdorp Provincial Hospital are grounded because of mechanical faults.

That leaves two vehicles to serve a vast area, including patients needing transport to specialist hospitals in Gqeberha.

For someone suffering burns, a woman in labour, a critically ill patient requiring specialist intervention or an injured person bleeding at the side of the road, the ambulance is the bridge between an emergency and medical care.

When that bridge disappears, the consequences can be catastrophic.

The allegation that a pregnant woman delivered a still-born baby and subsequently died while waiting for an emergency transfer must be investigated, as announced by the department. But it would be wrong to hide behind the need for a clinical investigation when the failings are obvious.

The department admitted that prolonged vehicle downtime is severely affecting ambulance operations.

This should embarrass the provincial government. Instead, we hear familiar language about new service providers, quicker repairs and faster turnaround times.

The provincial government cannot continue treating each crisis as a separate operational hiccup.

A broken ambulance here, a staffing shortage there, a security problem somewhere else, a strike at another hospital.

Taken individually, each problem can be explained. But together, they leave a department on its knees.

The irony is that the department announced on September 4 that it had received 26 new ambulances, which were deployed to areas deemed most in need, including the Sarah Baartman district. That should be welcome news. But for the people of Humansdorp, the obvious question is when will they see the benefit?

The people of Kouga should not have to hope that an ambulance is available when they dial for one.

They should be able to expect it.

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Making light of Bay's darkness is just adding insult to injury

In My View

DR CLAIRE BOTHA

I am angry, and I make no apology for it.

I'm writing this from my mother's kitchen table, where the power only came back on after being out for eight days.

Eight days of different officials giving different stories every time we called, with no-one able to say when it would end.

But it's not just my current situation that is driving me to produce this rant.

It's the assurances I keep hearing from parts of our business and institutional community that Nelson Mandela Bay is "bent but not broken," and that a few fixes would straighten it out.

Here's what gets me: this isn't just patronising, it's dismissive of the scale of what we're living through.

Their advice? Access information. Organise. Monitor commitments. Generate evidence. Escalate failures.

As if we haven't been doing exactly that our whole lives.

As if the problem was ever our passivity, not their paralysis, our silence, and not their refusal to act on what we've told them 100 times over.

Show me the pathway

from participation to power.

Show me how a rights-holder becomes a rights-enforcer.

Show me where collective conversation has ever converted into measurable change in this metro.

We already know the lived realities. What we don't have is a single example of "organise and escalate" actually fixing anything.

This is where their talk of "rights-holder agency" makes me sick. It hands us a title with no teeth.

The comfortable tropes keep coming: "social compact," "stand together," "unity" — yesterday's tools, wheeled out for today's structural problems.

Wake up: The Bay isn't in a rough patch it'll recover from once conditions improve.

Its problems are structural; they're changing the underlying conditions that determine whether recovery is even possible.

Deindustrialisation has weakened the city's economic base. Infrastructure is deteriorating.

Basic services are unreliable.

Institutional capacity is under strain.

Investment is being lost and declining economic competitiveness is weakening the very productive base on which future investment, employment and growth depend.

None of that gets fixed by another stakeholder workshop, another social compact or appeal to unity.

Participation may be part of the solution. It is not the solution.

Here's what I think is really going on: when you spend long enough learning to work around a broken system, the crack starts to look normal.

You get so good at stepping over it that you stop seeing it at all.

That's not resilience, it's a blind spot with good PR.

And that blind spot is exactly what turns "bent" from an honest diagnosis into a comforting euphemism.

So, test it properly.

Ask how the system is experienced by people who don't have the resources to route around its failures.

When there's no artisan, no service vehicle, a technical fault stops being technical, it becomes days without power for a household, and lost stock, lost trade, eventual closure for a small business.

Ask whether "bent, not broken" means anything at all to someone who can't buy their way around a municipal failure.

This is the uncomfortable truth: the system does not fail everyone equally.

People with money buy their way around it, backup power, water storage and security.

Everyone else absorbs the full cost.

"Bent" means inconvenience for some, and for too many, a daily grind of living with the wreckage.

So, the real question was never whether Nelson Mandela Bay is bent or broken.

It's who gets to decide that the people with the means to work around collapse, or the people with no choice but to live inside it.

Ask the family whose

breadwinner lost their job when Goodyear closed. For them, this system isn't bent. It's broken.

The Business Chamber, of all institutions, should know better than to reach for that word.

Its job is to enable business and attract investment, grow business and protect jobs.

Instead, this metro has bled major employers, watched grant funding evaporate, and lost SMMEs at an alarming clip.

A 2023 survey found 90% of local businesses had frozen investment and one in five had cut jobs, before Goodyear even shut its doors.

The Chamber's headline achievement is registering 350-odd small businesses in a city of 1.2 million people. Fine.

But how many are still trading? Nobody can say.

There's no public count of survivors versus casualties.

If the system were merely "bent," we'd expect those businesses to be growing, not quietly disappearing with no-one keeping score.

The problem isn't that our institutions are embedded in this ecosystem.

The problem is if that embeddedness makes them reluctant to ask whether it needs to change.

Nelson Mandela Bay doesn't lack people talking to one another. It lacks institutions capable of turning decisions into outcomes.

We don't need another conversation.

The Bay can be rebuilt. I still believe that.

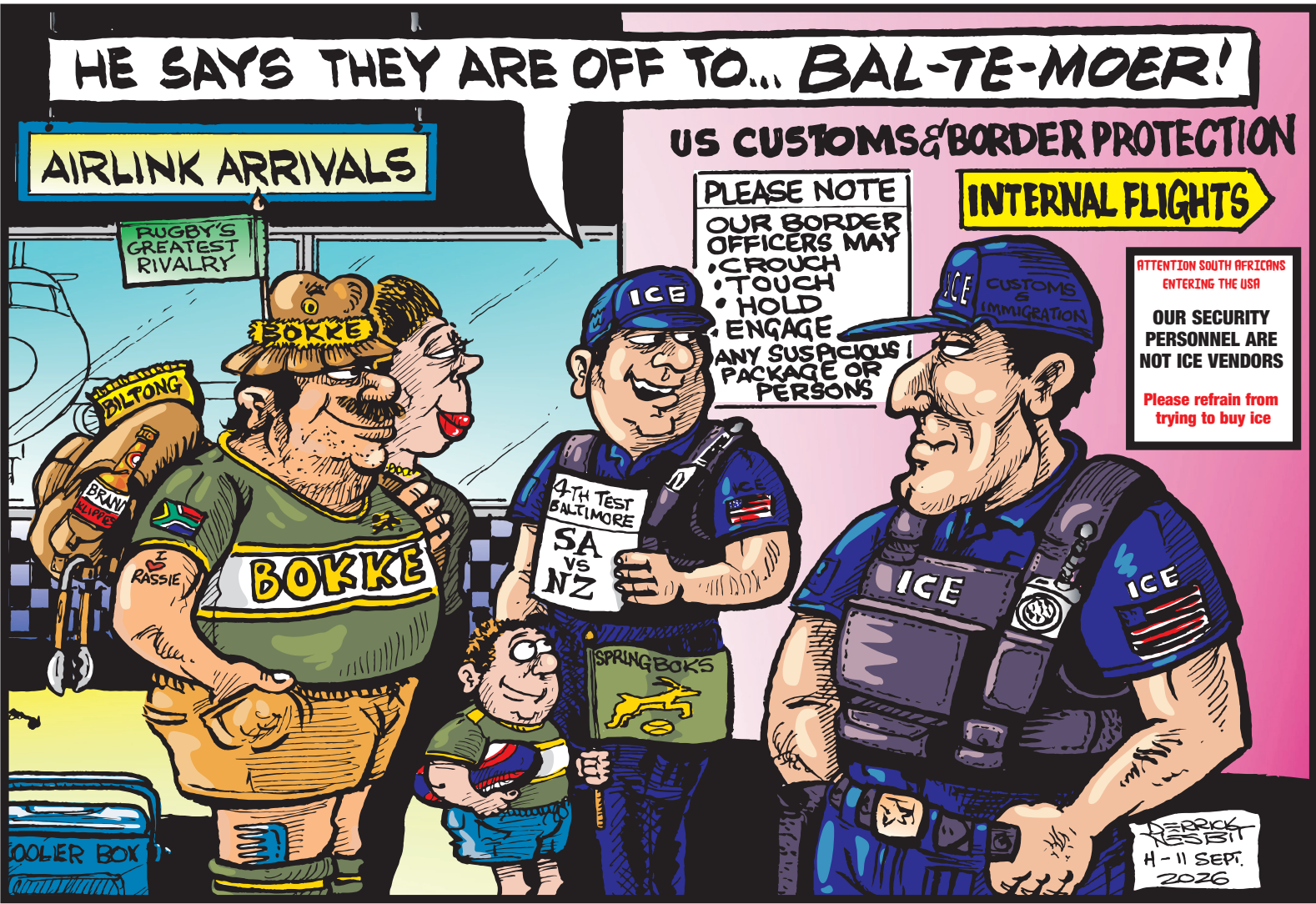
But you can't rebuild what you refuse to admit has fallen down, and you can't talk a burst pipe back together.

The real question isn't whether this city is bent or broken.

It's whether the people with the power to fix it are willing to say the word "broken" out loud, or whether they'll keep polishing the diagnosis from inside a bubble the rest of us were never invited into.

● Dr Claire Botha is a health economist and policy analyst specialising in public sector policy, health financing, and resource allocation, with more than 15 years' experience across government, NGO, higher education, and research sectors.

cartoon by derrick nesbit



today in history

- 1697** Austrian forces defeat an Ottoman army at the Battle of Zenta.
- 1777** British troops defeat the Americans at the Battle of Brandywine during the American Revolution.
- 1814** US naval forces defeat a larger British fleet at the Battle of Lake Chaplain during the War of 1812.
- 1902** Xhosa-speaking workers at the Brakpan Electrical Works go on strike.
- 1941** Construction begins on the US Pentagon building.
- 1973** General Augusto Pinochet leads a coup to overthrow the democratically elected government of Chile.
- 1950** Former SA prime minister Jan Smuts dies.
- 2001** The Pentagon and the twin towers of the World Trade Centre are hit by terror attacks.
- 2008** A major fire erupts in the Channel Tunnel between the UK and France.

Source: Britannica, SA History Online

Towards inclusive and sustainable growth: What the evidence says

SA and the broader Southern African Development Community (SADC) region face a difficult balancing act: we must restore economic growth, maintain financial stability, broaden inclusion, and transition to a greener economy at the same time.

My recent research with collaborators across the continent points to one clear lesson — these goals are not competing, they are complementary if policy is coherent.

First, on financial inclusion.

Our 2026 study on the effect of financial regulation on financial inclusion in the SADC region shows that regulation is a double-edged sword.

Well-designed, proportionate regulation expands inclusion, while overly restrictive compliance requirements choke it.



In My View

LEWARD JEKE

The policy implication for SA and SADC regulators is to adopt risk-based, tiered regulation that encourages mobile money, agency banking and savings and credit co-operatives, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach imported from advanced economies.

Second, inclusion must translate into productive credit.

In our work on bank credit's role in influencing economic growth in emerging markets, we find it is not just the volume of credit that matters, but its allocation.

When bank credit flows to productive sectors such as manufacturing and SMEs, growth follows.

When it is concentrated in consumption or speculative activities, growth stalls and asset quality deteriorates, as we also found in Ghana and Zimbabwe.

The SA Reserve Bank and National Treasury should therefore strengthen incentives for developmental lending, supported by effective credit infrastructure.

Third, this must be done without undermining stability.

Our research on Basel III capital regulation and bank profitability in emerging markets suggests that higher capital buffers do improve resilience, but they also compress profitability and can reduce lending if implemented abruptly.

For SA, a gradual, well-communicated transition path for Basel III, coupled with support for banks to diversify income streams, will protect both stability and intermediation.

Fourth, the green transition is no longer optional.

Our studies on green technology and energy consumption

efficiency in Zimbabwe and on carbon tax and environmental quality in SA reach the same conclusion: green technology adoption significantly improves energy efficiency, and a carbon tax does improve environmental quality when properly priced.

However, technology adoption requires upfront investment and clear price signals.

Government should expand targeted tax incentives and green finance facilities for firms investing in green tech and recycle carbon tax revenues to support vulnerable households

and firms to adapt.

Fifth, all of this requires fiscal capacity.

In two papers on tax revenue mobilisation in the SADC bloc and in SA, we find a consistent result: ICT matters.

Internet usage, mobile cellular subscriptions and digital automation significantly increase tax collection across all tax categories by reducing delays, evasion and administrative costs.

Our separate study on foreign direct investment and tax revenue also shows that FDI only boosts revenue when institutional quality is strong.

The recommendation is straightforward: accelerate SA Revenue Service digitisation, invest in e-filing and mobile tax platforms, and close the digital divide across SADC.

Sixth, the external sector remains vulnerable.

Our recent work on inflation and exchange rate dynamics pass-through effects shows that exchange rate depreciation still feeds strongly into domestic inflation in the region.

This limits the space for monetary policy. Managing this requires a mix of building foreign reserves, improving export diversification, and anchoring inflation expectations to reduce second-round effects.

Finally, the digital economy offers a new lifeline.

Our forthcoming research on remittance inflows in a digital economy in Sub-Saharan

Africa indicates that reducing the cost of digital remittances and formalising them can become a stable source of external finance, household income and even financial inclusion, especially when linked to mobile wallets.

The policy package that emerges is integrated: regulate finance to include, not exclude; direct credit to productive uses; implement global standards at a local pace; use ICT to broaden the tax base; use carbon pricing and green incentives to drive efficiency; and harness digital remittances.

Done together, SA can achieve growth that is both inclusive and sustainable.

● Prof Leeward Jeke is an economist in the faculty of business and economic science at Nelson Mandela University, writing on his own capacity.