



CITY IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS

A discussion with Katlego Dikobe

General Manager, Gauteng Precinct Management Association

At the end of March 2026, CDE convened a meeting to explore how neighbourhood-based organisations like city improvement districts (CIDs) are helping Johannesburgers deal with the increasing failures of the metro government, and what role these organisations might play in the future. The discussion forms part of CDE's ongoing engagement with people and organisations concerned about the state of Johannesburg. The aim is to reflect on the city's challenges and to explore potential solutions. This report reflects the issues raised in the latest discussion.

Katlego Dikobe, General Manager of the Gauteng Precinct Management Association, an organisation representing CIDs in Gauteng, kicked off the discussion. CIDs, he explained, had developed internationally in the 1970s as a way for property owners in a defined urban area to organise themselves, contribute resources, and manage their surroundings. This model has expanded into South Africa, now with almost 60 CIDs in Gauteng metros.

While the CID model has taken different forms across municipalities in South Africa, the basic structure is consistent: a defined area is established, property owners agree to work together, and a formal entity is created to manage operations. Funding is collected through an additional levy or contribution, and used to support services such as cleaning, security, greening and marketing within the area.

CIDs are statutory neighbourhood associations, often led by business owners and established in neighbourhoods with substantial commercial or mixed-use public spaces. Residents' associations (RAs), by contrast, are community-based groups that emerge primarily in residential neighbourhoods. Both create a single point of engagement with the municipality. Instead of individuals trying to navigate the system on their own, there is a collective platform with a representative. This makes it easier to raise issues, coordinate responses and engage with officials.

It also gives local firms and residents a way to have some stake in what is happening in their areas, even though formal authority remains with the local government.

CIDs are normally and ideally set up to complement the work of the municipality. Their goal is to support service delivery, not replace it. They do not have the authority to enforce by-laws or carry out core municipal functions. That power remains with the municipality. Participants noted, for example, that CID teams cannot tow illegally parked cars or enforce compliance without the involvement of municipal enforcement agencies.

In practice, CIDs often act as intermediaries. They identify problems, report them, and follow up with the relevant metro departments. If there is illegal dumping, a burst pipe or a broken pavement, the CID becomes the point of contact for both the community and the municipality. A CID representative takes responsibility for logging the issue with the metro and pushing for a response. This role of follow-up and coordination can be an important pressure point in any city and involves community members in the management of their neighbourhoods.

The ideal, participants suggested, is a city that works with and responds to these neighbourhood organisations. In Cape Town, for example, there are reportedly dedicated units in the city administration that work with CIDs and similar groups. They help with setting them up and provide a consistent point of contact, which makes engagement easier and more predictable.

There are productive partnerships in Johannesburg where CIDs and RAs are helping to maintain infrastructure or resurface roads and have developed projects to provide backup power to traffic lights, so they continue working during power outages. Such arrangements could, it was felt, be strengthened and generalised under a new mayor after the 2026 local government elections.

In a functioning municipality, the main role of CIDs is therefore to fill gaps, coordinate activity and improve how areas are managed. However, when a municipality has practically collapsed, CIDs find themselves acting as substitutes for the municipality. In the discussion, it was made clear that instead of playing a supportive role, CIDs, RAs and other community organisations across the city are being forced to take on aspects of basic service delivery that the Metro is supposed to provide.

In this respect, the situation in Johannesburg is deteriorating rapidly. Engagement happens, but it is the exception rather than the rule. The general feeling expressed by the organisations working with CIDs or RAs was one of frustration. They spoke about having to navigate different departments, whilst still failing to find the right contact for neighbourhood issues, and uncommunicative or unhelpful ward councillors. Others spoke about a consistent failure by officials to deliver despite ongoing requests and demands from CIDs and other residents. In Rosebank, for example, money was allocated five years ago in the integrated development plan for the construction of a much-needed taxi rank. There has been almost no progress since then, and no indication why this hasn't happened or where the money has gone.

Examples were cited where unaccountable city officials regard CIDs as opportunities to shirk their responsibilities. There are reportedly cases where municipal waste removal services had completely stopped serving a community after a CID had stepped in to remove illegal dumping, an act that the CID was forced into in the first place by the municipality's ongoing neglect.

Johannesburg has become a tapestry of neighbourhoods that have a CID and those that do not. The areas with CID interventions have shown visible improvements, with cleaner streets, 24-hour

security, and spaces that support opening up new businesses. Participants pointed to Gandhi Square, Jewel City, and other parts of Johannesburg's inner city as examples of what CIDs can do. But right next to these pockets of progress are areas plagued by many of the city's challenges, such as lack of maintenance, underinvestment and issues caused by weak service delivery.

CIDs and RAs are most likely to emerge in areas where households and businesses are generally well-resourced and where property rights are clear and secure. It is always a challenge to collect contributions from all the participating households, but such organisations can make an important difference as long as there are sufficient households willing to contribute funds and/or their time.

Poorer areas face bigger challenges in this regard, but community or civic organisations appear to be on the rise in many townships. Participants referred to examples in Orange Farm, where community groups organise around cleaning, safety and other area issues. In other townships dealing with high levels of crime, residents organised themselves to escort people walking home from taxi ranks to reduce the risk of robbery. The structure is less formal, but the purpose remains the same. In these cases, contributions are not always financial; sometimes people contribute time or labour.

The discussion made clear that CIDs and RAs are now part of how many areas in Johannesburg function. They differ in structure and in who participates, but they serve a similar purpose. They create a way for people to organise, to engage with government, and to have some influence over what happens in their areas. How these kinds of structures could fit into a new, more effective way to manage a city seeking to turn itself around, is an important issue for the next mayor of Johannesburg.



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