

- Governance
- Sustainability
- Inclusion
- African-led

HOW THIS PLAYS OUT ACROSS THE ISSUE

- pg 1 Editor's Note: The Right Question
- pg 2 Five Governance Insights from This Edition
- pg 3-pg6 The Pattern: Four Failure Points Every Crisis Will Find
- pg7-pg8 The Migration Context: Evidence, Not Thesis
- pg 9-pg10 The Labour Aspiration Gap: A Governance Failure Hidden in Plain Sight
- pg 11 Social Cohesion as Resilience Indicator
- pg 12-14 Feature: Zevile Dlamini — What Institutional Resilience Looks Like in Practice
- pg 15 Three Governance Futures
- pg 16-pg17 Think | Listen | Act — The Institutional Trigger Watchlist
- pg 18 WHAT'S ON OUR RADAR
- pg 19 CALL FOR CONTRIBUTORS



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WHEN INSTITUTIONS ARE TESTED: What Every Crisis Reveals

EDITOR'S NOTE: THE RIGHT QUESTION

South Africa was held by Africa before it could hold itself.

The nations that hosted our exiles, trained our cadres, sheltered our leaders, and absorbed the economic and political costs of opposing apartheid did so because they understood a simple principle: what happens to one African nation matters to all African nations.

That history is not a footnote. It is part of the foundation on which South Africa stands, and it matters as we navigate today's debates about migration, borders, and belonging.

This special edition of Rooted began as a response to the current migration moment. Yet migration itself is not the central story.

The migration debate is crowded. It is emotional, political, and increasingly polarised. What interests Rooted is something different: the governance architecture behind the event. Not what is happening. Why it keeps happening in the same way.

Every major crisis in South Africa eventually exposes the same institutional weaknesses.

COVID-19. The July 2021 unrest. Flood disasters across KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape, and the Western Cape. Energy instability. Service delivery failures. The current migration tensions. Their causes differ. Their impacts differ. Yet they repeatedly reveal the same fault lines: coordination,

communication, decision authority, accountability, and institutional resilience.

Migration did not create these weaknesses. It revealed them.

The right question for this edition is therefore not whether migration is the problem. Rather, the current moment invites a broader examination of governance capacity and institutional effectiveness.

Migration has highlighted weaknesses in systems responsible for documentation, border management, labour mobility, regional coordination, and public trust.

Where institutions struggle to distinguish between documented and undocumented movement, where administrative processes become vulnerable to abuse, or where cooperation mechanisms remain underdeveloped, pressures accumulate over time.

The question is not what is happening. The question is what breaks first when institutions come under pressure. The answer, from a practitioner who has governed through some of South Africa's most significant governance stress events of the past decade, is specific, observable, and applicable far beyond the migration debate.

This edition introduces two frameworks that emerged from that conversation: the Four Predictable Institutional Failure Points and social cohesion as a resilience indicator. It also

surfaces an insight that challenges a common assumption. South Africa does not simply face a labour shortage. It faces a labour aspiration gap — a governance failure involving education, vocational pathways, labour market alignment, and societal perceptions of work.

Six months from now, these frameworks will remain relevant regardless of how the migration debate evolves. Because another crisis will come. The question is whether our institutions will respond differently when it does.

This edition does not argue that borders do not matter, that undocumented migration does not exist, or that communities do not have legitimate concerns.

The state's responsibility to secure its borders, uphold immigration law, combat organised crime, and protect all who live within its jurisdiction remains fundamental.

The purpose of this edition is different. It examines why fundamentally different crises continue to expose the same institutional vulnerabilities, and what governance practitioners can do to strengthen resilience before the next stress event arrives.

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FIVE GOVERNANCE INSIGHTS FROM THIS EDITION

1. Crises do not create institutional weaknesses. They reveal the ones that already exist.

From COVID-19 and the July 2021 unrest to major flood disasters across KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape, and the Western Cape, recurring infrastructure failures, and the current migration tensions, South Africa's most significant governance stress events have repeatedly exposed the same fault lines: coordination, communication, decision authority, and human resilience. The trigger changes. The vulnerabilities do not.

2. What breaks first is not the governance structure. It is the system around it.

Policies remain intact. Frameworks survive. What fails is the operational architecture: who coordinates, who communicates, who is authorised to act, and whether the people responsible have the capacity to do so under pressure.

3. South Africa does not only face a skills gap. It faces a labour aspiration gap.

The economy requires artisans, caregivers, tradespeople, and small business owners. The narrative of success has been narrowed to professional and corporate careers. Migration has increasingly filled vocational gaps that governance systems failed to address.

4. Social cohesion is a resilience asset, not a social welfare outcome.

When communities are divided, disruption spreads beyond its trigger. When communities are cohesive, institutions can activate early warning, distribute resources, and recover faster. Social cohesion should be measured as a governance indicator.

5. Migration is the case study. Institutional failure is the thesis.

The current moment is not primarily a migration challenge. It is an institutional stress test that migration is making visible. The governance community's obligation is to address the institution, not manage the visibility.



THE PATTERN



THE PATTERN

Four Failure Points Every Crisis Will Find

South Africa has experienced a succession of governance stress events in recent years: the COVID-19 pandemic, the July 2021 unrest, major flood disasters across KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape, and the Western Cape, recurring infrastructure and service delivery disruptions, and the current migration mobilisation.

They differ in trigger, geography, sector, and political context. Yet they repeatedly expose the same institutional vulnerabilities. The failure pattern is remarkably consistent.

The governance practitioner's most useful question is not: what went wrong in this crisis? It is: why do the same things go wrong in every crisis? The answer produces a framework

— not for predicting which crisis comes next, but for addressing the institutional vulnerabilities that every crisis will find.

The four failure points should not be understood as separate institutional weaknesses. They are different expressions of the same underlying governance challenge: an institution's ability to transform awareness into action under pressure.

Every crisis generates information, uncertainty, urgency, and competing demands. Resilient institutions are not distinguished by the absence of disruption. They are distinguished by their ability to absorb information, make decisions, coordinate action, communicate clearly,

and sustain the people responsible for execution.

When institutions struggle, the failure rarely begins with policy. It begins somewhere along this chain. Information is not shared. Decisions are delayed. Coordination falters. Communication loses credibility.

People become exhausted. What appears as multiple failures is often a single breakdown in institutional responsiveness.

The four failure points therefore represent more than operational weaknesses. Together, they reveal an institution's capacity to convert information into coordinated action through resilient people.



THE PATTERN

The question is not which crisis is coming. It is whether your institution has addressed the four failure points before it arrives.

01 Coordination

The first system to fail is not the governance structure. Policies survive. Frameworks remain intact. What breaks is the operational architecture of coordination: who talks to whom, across which channels, under which authority, within what timeframe. Intra-institutional coordination fails because silos that are manageable under normal conditions become impermeable under pressure. Intergovernmental coordination fails because the relationships between provincial departments, national agencies, and municipal structures were never stress-tested.

► Evidence across crises: COVID-19: national-provincial coordination collapsed on procurement, PPE, and vaccine rollout. July 2021: intergovernmental response fragmented across security, social services, and economic recovery. Floods: disaster relief coordination between DWS, COGTA, and provincial departments broke at the first 72-hour window. Migration tensions: no coordinated early warning system between SAPS, Home Affairs, and provincial risk management.

Observable Indicators

- Number of agencies activated per crisis type vs planned
- Time to first joint-agency meeting after incident declaration
- Overlap in mandates without pre-assigned lead authority

Early Warning Signals

- Repeated delay in first 72-hour activation window across different crises
- No pre-existing relationship between counterparts before they need to call each other
- Two agencies issuing contradictory directives in the same response window

02 Communication

The second failure point is communication – not the absence of information, but the failure to move information at the speed that crises require. Plans exist on paper. Communication protocols are documented. But when pressure arrives, information silos, fear of accountability, and the instinct to wait for official confirmation create paralysis. Simultaneously, misinformation moves through community channels at speeds that official communication cannot match.

► Evidence across crises: COVID-19: conflicting guidance between national and provincial health authorities; vaccine hesitancy accelerated by information vacuum. July 2021: plans were not communicated to those responsible for executing them; community rumour networks outpaced official response. Floods: evacuation communication reached communities after the window for safe movement had closed. Migration tensions: when official communication is delayed, fragmented, or absent, informal information systems emerge to fill the void.

Observable Indicators

- Time lag between incident and first official communication to affected communities
- Ratio of official to community information channels in operational area
- Frequency of plan communication to staff prior to incident

Early Warning Signals

- Community-led information systems becoming primary source during a crisis
- Contradictory messaging across government levels in same 24-hour window
- BCM plan not communicated to staff responsible for executing it



THE PATTERN



03 Decision Authority

The third failure point is the gap between the people who have information and the people who have authority. In every crisis, frontline managers know what needs to happen. They do not have the mandate to make it happen without political clearance. Political clearance takes time. Crises do not wait. The result is paralysis at the operational level while the situation on the ground continues to evolve. Governance frameworks designed for accountability under normal conditions become sources of delay under emergency conditions.

► Evidence across crises: COVID-19: hospital managers could not procure without approval; provincial HODs waited for national directives while patients arrived. July 2021: risk managers knew response was required; political authorisation arrived after the intervention window closed. Floods: disaster declaration processes delayed resource deployment. Migration tensions: BCM leads know what preparedness measures are needed; political sensitivity creates hesitation.

Observable Indicators

- Percentage of decisions escalated above operational level during previous incidents
- Number of approvals required before a response action can be taken
- Existence and currency of pre-authorized crisis decision protocols

Early Warning Signals

- Operational staff waiting more than 6 hours for approval during an active incident
- Repeated escalation beyond pre-defined authority layers in previous crises
- Emergency procurement delayed by standard sign-off requirements

04 Human Resilience

The fourth and least documented failure point is the psychological and emotional capacity of the people responsible for governing through the crisis. Governance frameworks assume that decision-makers have unlimited capacity to absorb pressure. They do not. Sustained crisis conditions produce decision fatigue, communication failure, and coordination breakdown – not because people stop caring, but because sustained pressure gradually erodes the human capacity required to sustain performance. Leadership fatigue is a strategic risk factor that receives almost no institutional attention.

► Evidence across crises: COVID-19: frontline health workers, provincial HODs, and national officials operated without institutional support for psychological resilience across 18+ months. July 2021: risk managers governed through an interprovincial crisis with no psychosocial support infrastructure. Floods: the same officials managing COVID recovery were immediately redirected to flood response without recovery time. Migration tensions: practitioners describe carrying crisis load while managing community safety with no institutional acknowledgement of that burden.

Observable Indicators

- Number of consecutive crises activated for same personnel without rotation
- Existence of structured psychosocial support for staff during and after incidents
- Post-incident debrief rate and quality

Early Warning Signals

- Same personnel deployed across COVID, July 2021, floods, and current tensions without recovery
- Absence of structured debrief after incidents
- Decision-making slowdown and rework patterns emerging in later stages of a crisis



THE PATTERN



Failure Point Comparative Table

FAILURE POINT	PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS	CIVIL UNREST	NATURAL DISASTER	SOCIAL / POLITICAL MOBILISATION
Coordination	National-provincial procurement breakdowns	Fragmented intergovernmental response	Multi-agency disaster response failures	Limited cross-departmental early warning
Communication	Conflicting public guidance	Plans not reaching executors	Delayed community alerts and evacuation messaging	Information vacuums amplifying fear and misinformation
Decision authority	Operational leaders awaiting approval	Delayed authorisation during fast-moving events	Resource deployment constrained by formal processes	Hesitation caused by political sensitivity
Human resilience	Sustained fatigue across frontline leadership	Extended pressure on officials and responders	Recovery demands layered onto existing strain	Invisible crisis burden carried by practitioners



THE MIGRATION CONTEXT

THE MIGRATION CONTEXT Evidence, Not Thesis

This section draws on KM Nala Advisory political risk assessment KMNA-ZA-0526-02 (May 2026) and parliamentary responses tabled in June 2026. Analytical conclusions are those of KM Nala Advisory.

The current migration moment is not the thesis of this edition. It is the evidence. It functions as a stress test that makes visible three governance realities: institutional strain under complexity, the Labour Aspiration Gap, and the fragility of social cohesion when systems of authority and information weaken.

Migration, in its simplest form, refers to the movement of people from their usual place of residence to another location, either within or across national borders. It is not an exceptional condition of modern economies but a structural feature of them. According to the United Nations, more than 304 million people live outside their countries of birth, representing approximately 3.7% of the global population. This includes voluntary and forced movement driven by economic opportunity, education, family reunification, political instability, and environmental pressures.

At a systems level, migration reflects predictable dynamics: people move in response to economic opportunity, safety conditions, governance stability, and environmental stress. It is therefore not a deviation from order, but part of how global and regional systems distribute labour, skills, and population over time.

Southern Africa's Historical Mobility System

Migration into South Africa did not begin in 1994.

Southern Africa has long operated through structured and informal labour migration systems. The mining economy, in particular, was built on regional labour flows from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Lesotho, Malawi, Botswana, and Eswatini. Economic migration, circular migration, and cross-border labour mobility are longstanding features of the region's economic architecture.

What has changed is not the existence of migration, but its scale, visibility, economic context, institutional capacity, and public perception. South Africa today manages migration within a more complex constitutional democracy, under intensified economic pressure, and within institutions that were not designed for the current volume and velocity of cross-border movement.

The Governance Distinction That Must Be Preserved

The most consequential shift in South Africa's public discourse is the erosion of a critical governance distinction: the difference between legitimate regional mobility – grounded in SADC protocols, historical labour systems, and African integration frameworks – and undocumented migration arising from institutional and administrative failure.

When this distinction collapses, two failures occur simultaneously. Legitimate migrants are exposed to suspicion, harm, and policy backlash through association with undocumented movement.

At the same time, accountability for institutional weaknesses is displaced away from governance systems and redirected toward individuals operating within or across them. Neither outcome improves institutional performance. Both weaken it.

What Pan-African Solidarity Actually Requires

Pan-African solidarity is not a sentiment. It is a governance system with operational requirements.

It requires functional bilateral agreements that regulate movement transparently. It requires administrative systems capable of issuing, verifying, and safeguarding documentation without corruption or systemic delay. It requires the implementation – not only the signing – of SADC protocols governing labour mobility and cross-border movement. And it requires maintaining a clear distinction between documented and undocumented movement, precisely because collapsing that distinction produces institutional harm.

In a global context where multilateral cooperation is under strain and states increasingly prioritise selective bilateral arrangements, Africa's internal mobility systems are not symbolic. They are strategic infrastructure. South Africa's economic and labour relationships with countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and others across the continent are structurally embedded in its own economic functioning. Weakening those systems through governance failure carries long-term costs that are often only recognised

“*Even if migration disappeared tomorrow, the four failure points would still exist. That is the governance insight.*”



THE MIGRATION CONTEXT

after institutional options have narrowed.

The Governance Conclusion

Migration does not create institutional failure. It reveals it.

When governance systems are unable to manage documentation integrity, cross-border coordination, labour regulation, and public communication simultaneously, migration becomes the surface on which deeper institutional weaknesses are displayed. The governance response is therefore not simplification of the system through collapsing categories. It is strengthening the system so that distinctions can be maintained, legitimacy can be protected, and accountability can remain correctly located.

The answer to governance failure is governance reform. Not the displacement of accountability onto the people caught in the gaps that governance failure has produced.

Incentives, Visibility, and the Exploitation of Institutional Gaps

When institutional strain becomes visible, it does not exist in isolation. It creates an incentive environment in which different actors respond in predictable ways.

Electoral actors may find value in translating governance failure into simplified narratives that are easier to mobilise than structural reform. In such contexts, legitimate administrative shortcomings risk being reframed as identity-based or externally attributed threats, particularly where those affected cannot participate in electoral accountability systems.

Criminal networks operate within the space created by weakened coordination and fragmented enforcement. Their advantage lies not in causing



institutional failure, but in adapting to it. Where oversight is inconsistent, opportunities for illicit activity expand.

Within governance systems themselves, dysfunctional incentives can also emerge. In some cases, continued administrative complexity sustains informal rent-seeking opportunities, reducing the institutional pressure to simplify,

coordinate, or reform systems that have become inefficient.

Modern information ecosystems further amplify these dynamics. Social media platforms tend to reward emotional intensity over verification, which allows isolated incidents to be interpreted as systemic patterns, and delays in official communication to be filled by speculation and misinformation.

With electoral cycles approaching, these dynamics intensify. The political cost of amplification decreases at local level, while the mobilisation benefit increases. This creates a structural incentive to externalise frustration rather than resolve underlying institutional constraints. Moral condemnation without structural consequence does not alter this dynamic. Governance systems must instead address the incentive structures that allow dysfunction to be repurposed into mobilisation.



THE LABOUR ASPIRATION GAP



THE LABOUR ASPIRATION GAP

A Governance Failure Hidden in Plain Sight

South Africa faces a paradox. It has one of the highest unemployment rates in the world, yet employers across multiple sectors continue to report difficulty attracting and retaining people in certain vocational, technical, artisan, caregiving, and service occupations. The question is not whether work exists. The question is why significant gaps remain between available work, available skills, and labour market aspirations.

Migration into South Africa did not begin in 1994. Southern Africa has long operated through regional labour migration systems. The mining economy itself was built on

labour flows from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Lesotho, Malawi, Botswana, and Eswatini.

Economic migration, circular migration, and cross-border labour mobility are longstanding features of the region. What has changed is the scale, visibility, economic context, institutional capacity, and public perception of migration.

The current migration debate has made visible a deeper governance challenge. What does it reveal about a labour market when migrants consistently occupy spaces in sectors where local skills pipelines remain weak or insufficient? That is the governance question the current moment is forcing. Not 'why are

migrants here?' but 'why do these gaps persist?'

The answer points beyond borders. It points to the way societies prepare people for work, the pathways they create into livelihoods, and the signals they send about which forms of work are valued. Institutions do not merely allocate resources. They shape social prestige. Through education systems, labour market policies, funding decisions, and public narratives, societies communicate which occupations are respected, rewarded, and worth pursuing. Over time, these signals influence aspirations, career choices, and perceptions of social mobility.

South Africa does not only face a skills gap. It faces a labour aspiration gap — a mismatch between what the economy requires and what the dominant narrative of success tells young people to want.



THE LABOUR ASPIRATION GAP

For decades, the dominant narrative of success has centred on professional and corporate careers. University education has rightly been promoted as a pathway to advancement, but vocational pathways have often been positioned as secondary alternatives rather than strategic economic assets in their own right. Electricians, plumbers, mechanics, artisans, caregivers, hairdressers, technicians, and other skilled practitioners remain essential to economic functioning, yet vocational education and artisan development have not enjoyed the same status, visibility, or investment as many professional career pathways.

This does not imply that South Africans are unwilling to work. Rather, it suggests that governance systems have not created sufficient pathways, incentives, practical exposure, and social recognition for many occupations that remain essential to economic functioning. The issue is not work ethic. It is the architecture through which societies shape aspirations and connect people to opportunity.

The challenge is visible across multiple institutions. TVET colleges continue to struggle with questions of funding, quality, industry alignment, and public perception. Apprenticeship pipelines remain too narrow

relative to demand. Artisan development programmes reach too few people. Skilled trades that should represent respected routes to social mobility are too often treated as fallback options rather than first-choice careers.

Social grants – a necessary and legitimate social protection mechanism in a country marked by poverty, unemployment, and inequality – cannot resolve this challenge. Most people would prefer sustainable livelihoods where viable pathways exist. The governance failure is not the existence of grants. It is the failure to build sufficient pathways from education and training into meaningful economic participation.

“ A country cannot simultaneously neglect vocational education, stigmatise skilled trades, and express surprise when labour shortages emerge in exactly those occupations. ”

The current migration debate has exposed this reality. In many sectors, migrants are not creating labour shortages or skills gaps; they are occupying spaces that already existed. Their presence raises a governance question: why do those spaces remain available in the first place? Migration did not create the labour aspiration gap. It revealed it.

The long-term response therefore extends beyond border management. It requires rebuilding vocational pathways, strengthening apprenticeship systems, improving the standing and effectiveness of TVET institutions, aligning education more closely with labour market demand, and restoring skilled trades as respected routes to social mobility and economic success.

What Governance Must Address

TVET institution funding, quality, and reputation

Vocational pathways must be treated as strategic economic assets, not fallback options.

Apprenticeship and artisan development pipelines

Structured pathways from school into skilled trades must be expanded and aligned to demonstrated labour market demand.

Cultural rehabilitation of skilled trades

This is as much a governance communication challenge as it is an education policy challenge.

Social mobility architecture

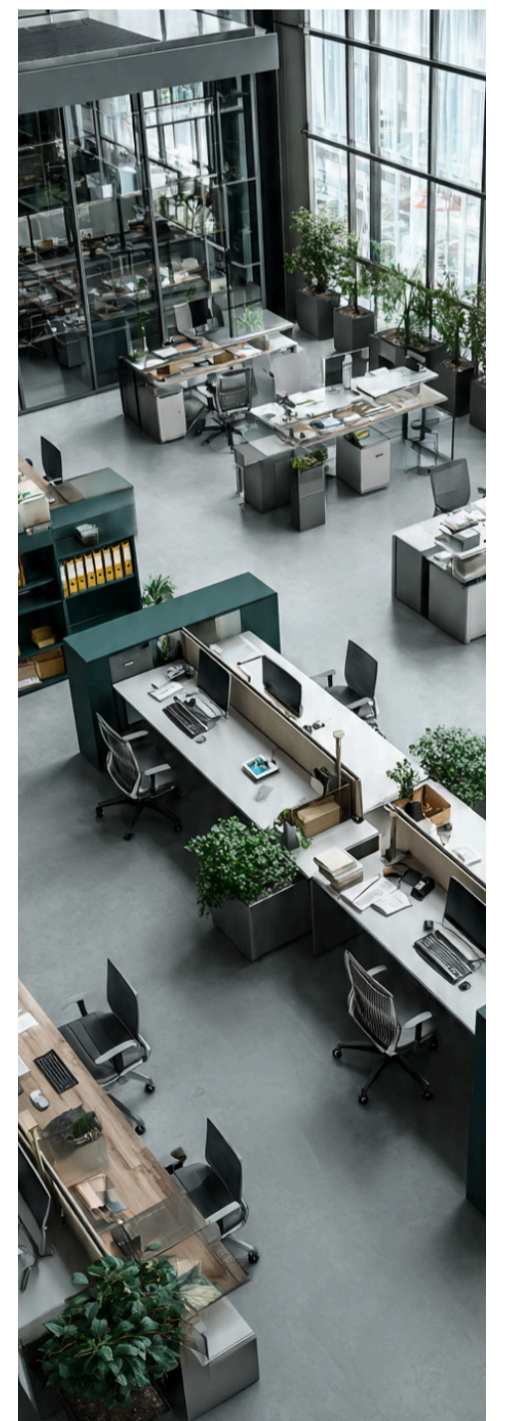
Vocational success must lead to income security, social recognition, career progression, and broader economic opportunity.

Education-to-work transitions

Institutions must create clearer pathways between training, certification, employment, and entrepreneurship.

Grant-to-livelihood transition mechanisms

The aspiration gap is not resolved by reducing social protection. It is resolved by building realistic pathways that make sustainable livelihoods genuinely accessible.



SOCIAL COHESION AS RESILIENCE INDICATOR

SOCIAL COHESION AS RESILIENCE INDICATOR A Framework That Governance Doesn't Yet Measure

This insight came from Zevile Dlamini's interview, almost as an aside, and it may be the most original governance contribution in this edition:

“ *Social cohesion itself should be viewed as a strategic resilience factor. When communities are divided, the effects of disruption can spread far beyond the original trigger event.* — **Zevile Dlamini** ”

Most governance resilience frameworks measure institutional variables: BCM plan completeness, risk register currency, board governance maturity, audit outcome. None of them measure social cohesion as a resilience asset. Yet Zevile's experience governing through July 2021 from inside KZN makes the claim precise: when community trust networks are intact, early warning travels faster, mutual aid activates earlier, and disruption is contained closer to its source. When they are fractured, disruption propagates.

This is not a soft claim about community harmony. It is an operational governance argument: social cohesion is load-bearing infrastructure in a crisis. Its absence is a risk exposure. Its presence is a resilience asset. And no current governance framework measures it as either.

An institution's social cohesion profile is as operationally relevant to its crisis resilience as its BCM plan. It is simply never measured that way.



What a Social Cohesion Resilience Indicator Would Measure

Community trust networks

Do the communities in the institution's operational area have functional relationships with each other and with the institution? Are those relationships strong enough to carry accurate early warning signals?

Cross-community communication channels

When a disruptive event occurs, can accurate

information move between communities faster than misinformation? Or does the information vacuum fill with fear?

Shared stake in institutional function

Do the communities served by the institution have a genuine stake in its continued function? Or do they experience it as external, extractive, or irrelevant?

Historical conflict memory

Has the community experienced previous

episodes of division? How were they resolved, and what is the residual tension level?

Rooted proposes that social cohesion be included as a fifth governance dimension in the Behavioural Risk Index introduced in Volume 8.

A department whose operational area has low social cohesion should carry a higher BCM risk rating than a department whose plans are identical but whose community relationships are intact.



If the previous sections examine institutional failure from the outside – its pattern, structural causes, and exploitation – the conversation that follows examines what institutional resilience looks like from the inside.

Very few governance practitioners have experienced the convergence of pandemic disruption, social unrest, flood response, and migration tensions from inside a provincial governance system. Zevile Dlamini – seven years inside KZN EDTEA, the province where every one of these crises has arrived at highest intensity – provides the practitioner foundation for the frameworks this edition introduces. The four failure points did not emerge from theory. They emerged from her testimony.

“
Institutions don't hold themselves during crises. People do.

– Zevile Dlamini

Director: Risk and Integrity Management, KZN EDTEA

FEATURE: What Institutional Resilience Looks Like in Practice A Conversation with Zevile Dlamini

Zevile Dlamini is the Director of Risk and Integrity Management at KZN EDTEA, where she has served for seven years. She chairs the BCM Committee, serves as Ethics Officer, and mentors emerging risk practitioners through IRMSA. She completed her MCom in Applied Risk Management at NWU in 2025, supervised by Katlego Majola. Views expressed are her professional opinions in her personal capacity and do not necessarily reflect the official position of her employer.

Disclaimer: This conversation reflects the personal professional views and experience of Zevile Dlamini as a risk and governance practitioner. The discussion does not constitute official commentary on government policy, operational planning, or the position of any public institution.

Q1 The Moment That Changed Things

July 2021 was the most serious unrest South Africa had experienced since 1994. Was there a specific moment during that period that fundamentally changed how you think about governance, leadership, or risk?

The defining moment for me was witnessing how an isolated incident escalated into an interprovincial crisis within a short space of time, disrupting economic activity and social stability. This confirmed that risks are interrelated and can escalate rapidly if root causes are not addressed immediately. This changed my perspective on governance: robust frameworks are as good as nothing if preparedness, coordination, and response are lacking. The importance of strategic direction, clear communication, and ethical and timely decision-making was brought into sharp relief.

The unrest taught me that resilience is not built during a crisis – it is built before one, through proactive risk intelligence and business continuity planning.

Q2 What July Revealed

What did the experience reveal about the gap between how institutions are designed to respond and how they actually respond under pressure?

It revealed that institutions have plans and procedures in place, but they are gathering dust on shelves – not reviewed, not communicated, not put into practice. This led to confusion and an inability to respond proactively when the incident turned into a crisis. Fragmented coordination, poor communication, delayed decision-making, limited resources, and uncertainty made it difficult to activate plans and invoke relevant governance structures.

“ **Resilience is not built during a crisis. It is built before one – through proactive risk intelligence and business continuity planning.** ”
– Zevile Dlamini



FEATURE

Q3 What External Analysis Consistently Misses

You have spent seven years governing risk from inside KZN. What does external analysis consistently get wrong, underestimate, or simply not see?

KZN has a highly engaged population regarding political, social, and community issues. Historically, the people in the province have held strong convictions and have often been willing to mobilise around issues that affect them – whether they relate to governance, service delivery, political shifts, or community concerns. From a risk perspective this means changes can translate to collective action quite quickly. This challenges institutions to closely monitor social trends, community concerns, and stakeholder views as important risk signals alongside traditional risk monitoring.

Q4 Where the System Is Most Fragile

From your direct experience – what breaks first when multiple pressures arrive simultaneously?

The first thing that breaks is not the governance structures, policies, and procedures. These remain intact. What comes under strain first is coordination, communication, and timeous decision-making. This fragility is mostly a challenge both within each institution and across government institutions, as there are limitations with intergovernmental relations. We have seen it happen with COVID-19, the unrest, and the KZN floods – major incidents that required effective intergovernmental coordination and found the system wanting.

Coordination, communication, and timeous decision-making break first. The governance frameworks remain intact while the system around them fails to activate them.

Q5 Reading Readiness Beyond Compliance

What are the first indicators that tell you whether genuine preparedness exists – beyond compliance documentation and checklists?

Genuine preparedness is usually visible long before you review a risk register or BCM plan. The first indicators are behavioural rather than procedural. Readiness is confirmed by how leaders talk about risk. In resilient institutions, risk is actively discussed by leadership as a strategic consideration – not delegated to specialists. People know who to call. Information flows freely. There is a culture of collaboration rather than siloed decision-making. Another indicator is whether people are comfortable discussing weaknesses. Genuinely resilient institutions are very aware of their vulnerabilities. And contingency planning has been exercised, not merely documented. Plans that have been tested through real-world scenarios produce confidence. Plans that exist only on paper create a false sense of security. The strongest predictor of resilience is the quality of risk conversations, collaboration, and decisions that exist before the disruption arrives.

“**Human resilience is often the hidden foundation upon which organisational resilience depends.**”

– Zevile Dlamini

Q7 The Human Cost Governance Frameworks Don't Capture

What happens to decision-makers and frontline officials during a prolonged crisis that governance frameworks rarely document?

One of the realities that governance frameworks do not capture is the human burden carried by those responsible for keeping institutions functioning during a crisis. Frameworks describe structures, roles, and reporting lines – but they assume that the people executing those responsibilities have unlimited capacity to absorb pressure. Prolonged crises place extraordinary demands on decision-makers. They must make high-stakes decisions with incomplete information, manage competing priorities, and maintain operational stability – all while experiencing the same uncertainty affecting the broader population. Fatigue becomes a significant but largely invisible risk. Leadership fatigue is a strategic risk factor that receives far too little attention. Institutions do not usually fail because people stop caring. They struggle because sustained pressure gradually erodes the human capacity required to sustain performance. Human resilience is often the hidden foundation upon which organisational resilience depends.

“**The strongest predictor of resilience is the quality of risk conversations, collaboration, and decisions which exist before the disruption arrives.**”

– Zevile Dlamini



FEATURE

Q8 Three Things, One Week

If you had only one week and limited resources, what are the three actions every HOD, Risk Director, or BCM Lead must complete before a major disruption?

When time is short, resilience comes down to three things: prioritisation, communication, and stress-testing. I'd start by identifying what must be protected, who must make decisions and communicate, and what could break first. Everything else builds from there.

Q9 Decision-Making in a Rapidly Evolving Crisis

How do decision-making and authorisation processes affect institutional response during a rapidly evolving crisis?

Decision-making and authorisation processes can be either a source of resilience or a source of delay. Most public-sector governance systems are designed for accountability, oversight, and compliance under normal conditions. Crises compress time and require decisions before complete information is available. During fast-moving situations, people often know what needs to be done but are unclear about who has the mandate to act – creating hesitation while agility matters most. Institutions also become more risk-averse: leaders know their decisions will be scrutinised, which creates a tendency to wait for perfect information that never arrives. The improvement I would advocate for is smarter controls: pre-authorised response mechanisms that allow leaders to act quickly within clearly defined parameters while maintaining accountability. The major disruptions in KwaZulu-Natal have repeatedly shown that the speed of decision-making can itself become a resilience factor.

Q10 The Message to Peers

Speaking practitioner to practitioner: what do you want every Risk Director and BCM Officer in an affected province to do differently right now?

Stop preparing only for the risks you can easily identify and start preparing for the speed at which risks can combine. Most organisations have risk registers and continuity plans but approach risks in isolation. The reality is that major disruptions rarely arrive one at a time. They emerge as combinations of social, environmental, economic, technological, political, infrastructure, and human factors that reinforce one another. When disruption arrives, institutions rarely rise to the level of their plans. They fall back on the quality of their leadership, relationships, coordination, communication, preparedness, and culture.

“ **Institutions rarely rise to the level of their plans. They fall back on the quality of their leadership, relationships, coordination, and culture.** ”
Zevile Dlamini

Q11 What This Province Makes of Its Practitioners

What has seven years inside KZN governance taught you about leadership under pressure that could not have been learned anywhere else?

Seven years in KwaZulu-Natal taught me that leadership under pressure is more about responsibility than authority. When institutions are under stress, people look to individuals for clarity and confidence, not structures. The province has shown me humility. No matter how sophisticated our frameworks, there are limits to prediction and control. Leadership becomes about staying steady amid uncertainty,

making decisions without complete information, listening carefully, and remaining adaptable. The greatest lesson from KwaZulu-Natal is that governance is a human endeavour. Systems, policies, and frameworks matter, but during crises, resilience depends on people, relationships, and courageous leadership. Institutions don't hold themselves during crises. People do. The true work is building judgement, trust, and resilience in the people who carry systems through pressure.

Q12 What You Carry Forward

What is the most important thing your experience has equipped you to bring to this moment?

If there is one thing my experience has equipped me to bring to this moment, it is perspective and preparedness. Working in risk, integrity management, and business continuity in KwaZulu-Natal has taught me that disruptions rarely happen the way they are described in plans. They are often faster, more complex, and more interconnected than expected. Risk management is not about predicting every crisis – it is about helping institutions remain functional and make sound decisions when the unexpected happens. Personally, this moment requires me to continue learning, strengthening partnerships, mentoring others, and contributing to a culture where risk management and BCM are seen as strategic tools rather than compliance exercises.



THREE GOVERNANCE FUTURES

THREE GOVERNANCE FUTURES

What the Next Five Years Could Reveal

The purpose of this edition is not to forecast a specific crisis. It is to examine how South Africa’s institutional trajectory may evolve depending on whether governance lessons from recent crises are institutionalised or ignored.

These are not predictions. They are governance possibility spaces shaped by how systems respond to repeated stress.

A — ADAPTIVE RESILIENCE	B — MANAGED FRAGILITY	C — COMPOUNDING STRAIN
<p>Institutions learn from successive crises and deliberately strengthen their capacity to respond under pressure. Coordination mechanisms become embedded rather than activated ad hoc. Decision rights are clarified in advance of emergencies. Business continuity evolves from a compliance requirement into a core governance capability. Social cohesion is treated as an operational variable within resilience planning.</p> <p>In this future, crises still occur, but their systemic impact is progressively contained because institutions improve their ability to convert information into coordinated action.</p>	<p>Institutions remain operational but structurally unchanged. Governance systems continue to function: policies are implemented, audits are completed, and compliance frameworks remain intact. However, the underlying weaknesses exposed by successive stress events are not materially resolved.</p> <p>Each new crisis is managed, but at increasing institutional cost. Coordination becomes slower, trust becomes more volatile, and system performance depends increasingly on individual leadership capacity rather than institutional design.</p>	<p>Institutional weaknesses accumulate faster than they are addressed. Coordination capacity deteriorates under repeated pressure, decision-making cycles lengthen, and implementation gaps widen. Public trust erodes unevenly and social cohesion becomes increasingly fragmented.</p> <p>Over time, crises cease to be discrete events and begin to interact. The system shifts from crisis response to consequence management, with institutions increasingly absorbing downstream effects rather than addressing upstream causes.</p>
<p>Key Signal: Institutions become stronger because learning is institutionalised rather than episodic.</p>	<p>Key Signal: Institutions function, but resilience remains dependent on individuals rather than systems.</p>	<p>Key Signal: Institutions spend more time managing outcomes than correcting the conditions that produce them.</p>

The difference between these futures is not the severity of shocks. It is whether institutional learning becomes embedded faster than institutional strain accumulates.



• THINK • LISTEN • ACT

THINK



LISTEN



ACT



The Institutional Trigger Watchlist

The Four Failure Points framework is operational. It applies to every crisis that comes next, not only the current one. The Trigger Watchlist below translates the framework into a practical early warning instrument. It is designed to be reviewed at each BCM committee meeting and updated after every incident.

Observable Indicators are measurable conditions that can be monitored proactively. Early Warning Signals are patterns that indicate a failure point is approaching threshold. Red Flag is the compound risk signature: when three or more failure points activate simultaneously in one incident, the institution is in Compounding Strain territory.

FAILURE POINT	OBSERVABLE INDICATORS	EARLY WARNING SIGNALS	RED FLAG
Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No joint interdepartmental meeting within 72 hours of incident Conflicting directives issued within same response window Lead agency role undefined prior to incident 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Repeated 72-hour activation delay across different crisis types Counterparts don't know each other before needing to call Two agencies acting independently on the same incident 	<p><i>Multiple agencies acting independently on the same incident without coordination.</i></p>
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Official communication lag exceeds 24 hours in fast-moving incident BCM plan not communicated to execution staff No pre-mapped community information channels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community misinformation becomes primary information channel Contradictory messaging across government levels in same window Rise in community-led information systems during crisis 	<p><i>Official communication reaches affected communities after misinformation has already shaped community response.</i></p>
Decision authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operational staff waiting >6 hours for approval during active incident No pre-authorized crisis decision protocols >3 escalation layers required before response action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Repeated escalation beyond pre-defined authority layers Emergency procurement delayed by standard sign-off requirements Staff know what to do but hesitate due to unclear mandate 	<p><i>Crisis situation evolves significantly while approval for initial response is still pending.</i></p>
Human resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Same personnel deployed across consecutive crises without rotation No structured debrief after incidents No psychosocial support infrastructure during crisis periods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decision-making slowdown and rework in later stages of a crisis Absence of debrief after each major incident Leadership team expressing exhaustion before crisis peaks 	<p><i>Same individuals carry leadership load across all major crises without institutional recovery support.</i></p>



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COMPOUND RISK SIGNATURE

When three or more failure points activate simultaneously in a single incident, the institution has entered Compounding Strain territory. This is the most dangerous configuration – not because any single failure point is catastrophic, but because their interaction degrades performance faster than any remediation can restore it. This signature should trigger immediate escalation to the highest governance level available.

Applying the Four Failure Points

Coordination

- Map your intergovernmental coordination architecture: for each crisis scenario, which departments, agencies, and municipal structures must coordinate, and do those relationships exist before the crisis arrives?
- Identify the single person in your institution responsible for coordinating with each critical external body. That person should know their counterpart by name before they need to call them.

Communication

- Test your BCM plan's communication chain: does every person with a role in execution know the plan exists and know what it requires of them? If not, that is the first intervention.
- Map the misinformation pathways in your operational area: which community channels will carry fear faster than your institution can carry facts? Build your counter-communication capacity before you need it.

Decision authority

- Draft a two-page crisis decision window protocol: which response actions can a manager take without political clearance? Which require it? Make that distinction explicit before the crisis asks the question.
- Run one scenario walk-through: if significant disorder occurs in your operational area within 72 hours, who decides in the first six hours? If the answer requires someone who cannot be reached, that is the failure point.

Human resilience

- Create one structured space for the conversation about decision quality under pressure in your senior management team – before the next test arrives, not during it.
- Identify which members of your leadership team are carrying accumulated stress from previous crisis periods. The fourth failure point is the one no governance framework currently requires you to address. It is also the one most likely to determine your institution's performance when the others have already been tested.



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Institutions fail long before they collapse.

They fail when coordination weakens, when communication slows, when decision authority is unclear, and when the people inside them have run out of the resilience no framework requires them to protect. The lesson of this moment is not that South Africa faces a migration challenge.

It is that every governance system eventually reveals the quality of the people and the systems entrusted with it.

Institutions do not hold themselves.

People do.



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