As the problem of HIV/AIDS is too big to be addressed by any one organisation, involvement of many organisations in a city is crucial to tackle this disease, by bringing together resources to sustain awareness, prevention, treatment and care.

Msunduzi, near Durban, is a city of 570,000 people in the epicentre of the South African AIDS pandemic. Msunduzi has an HIV prevalence of approximately 18%, with an estimated 100,000 people living with the virus, 250 AIDS-related deaths per month and 10,000 AIDS orphans. Until recently, programmes to address the problem had been directed by National and Provincial Government, but poor co-ordination at the local level, particularly between government and non-government services, led to many gaps in service provision.

The Municipality took some time to recognise that HIV/AIDS has a severe impact on the health and sustainability of the city, but since the new Deputy Mayor became committed to taking on HIV, it has embarked on a comprehensive programme to deal with the issue. Based on principles of partnership with all sectors of civil society, the programme addresses both municipal employees and the public at large, and includes prevention measures, treatment and care for those infected, and care for those otherwise affected, specifically orphans.

In March 2001, the City Council adopted a comprehensive AIDS plan for its 3,500 employees, devised by an Internal AIDS Task Team, and involving municipal officials and representatives of the two Trade Unions of municipal workers. The objectives were: to train 80 staff as peer educators, who would be released from work to educate colleagues; to train 15 staff as AIDS counsellors, who would be counselling co-workers on a one-to-one basis; and to hold regular educational presentations for municipal staff on all aspects of HIV/AIDS.
In November 2001, a comprehensive city-wide strategy was initiated with the NGOs and CBOs in the city, following a participatory situation analysis and a consultative process. This strategy established three main priorities:

1) Education, awareness, and prevention - reducing the infection rate through education, availability of condoms, and changed sexual behaviour, promoting acceptance for people living with AIDS, and establishing voluntary testing and counselling centres.

2) Treatment and a 'continuum of care' for people infected - designing and implementing a comprehensive referral system, supporting NGOs and CBOs in developing drop-in clinics, hospices, and community support programmes through, for example, the support to some 200 home-based care volunteers consisting of US$1,000 worth of supplies monthly, and extending services to all existing clinics.

3) Care for vulnerable children and orphans - providing food, shelter, and school care, and supporting a network of 60 organisations involved in care for children.

The key to the sustainability of the programme is the re-allocation and coordination of existing resources in the city - in terms of finance, human resources (public servants, NGO staff and volunteers), expertise, buildings and equipment. There is no dependence on external funding or loans, although further funding is being sought for some more expensive components of the programme in the future (e.g. building a new hospice). So far, however, the city has shown that much progress can be made with what it already has.

The city's programmes were used to inform the development of the ‘HIV/AIDS Toolkit for Local Government’ by the Health Economics and HIV/AIDS Research Division of the University of Natal, and the methods have now been spread throughout the Province. The Situation Analysis and Service Gap Analysis undertaken at the beginning of the process to inform the strategy development is being used as an example to other local authorities by the Education and Training Unit in Pretoria.