**PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE HEARS PETITION ON EPWP**

The lack of fairness and transparency in how the participants of the Extended Public Works Programme (EPWP) are recruited was a subject of a petition brought by Mr Shaun August, a member of the Good Party, before the Portfolio Committee on Public Works today. The Department of Public Works was compelled to respond to its grave concerns.

Front and centre to his petition, which was submitted to the Speaker of the National Assembly on 11 December 2020, is the lack of mechanisms to enforce the Code of Good Practice that seeks to “ensure that this programme is not turned into a political patronage as is the case to date,” Mr August proclaimed.

It has not become a common cause, he pointed out, that “the programme has been consistently benefiting those loyal to councillors that are responsible for these programmes”. Besides, he added, “they have turned into an electioneering tool and people are often told by these unscrupulous councillor vote for us or starve”.

 One of the remedial actions that this petition proposes is the review of the EPWP policy to ensure that these programmes “comply with principles of fairness and transparency and be positioned as a poverty alleviation rather than a political tool”. He further stated that they received signatories from good people, but not necessarily from his Good Party who enlisted these concerns about these programmes. And their grievances “should be addressed speedily and ensure that EPWP is underpinned and South Africans get equitable opportunity in this programme as envisioned during its inception”.

The Chief Director at the Department of Public Works, Ms Carmen-Joy Abrahams**,**stated that the concerns raised in Mr August’s petition constitute the challenges that the department has identified and that it has been grappling with to ensure that the recruitment process is not subjected to “political patronage which lead to lack of transparency due to its poorly defined criteria”.

 The anomaly regarding the later has led to the inception of recruitment guidelines, which have been agreed upon “through consultations with various stakeholders and role players which has now been approved by the minister of labour”. The result of which are new guidelines for induction to spell out what is expected of the participants to this programme, the principles governing the demographics, and how geographical locations are related to its recruitment policy, she said.

These findings have led to a dedicated “focus aimed at coming up with the policy framework to ensure that there is fairness, transparency and ethics and accountability in relation to the recruitment of participants in this programme”. In addition to that, universal principles will be enforced to ensure that this programme is in line with labour relations. One of which is to ensure that “its remuneration is in line with the Minimum Wage Act. Because there’s been an outcry regarding that and we are bound by law to observe that.”

As part of its accountability measure, Ms Abrahams stated, the department has also incepted a social audit framework to ask communities to assess the impact of this programme. The department has a difficult task in that it plays a coordination role between provincial and municipal EPWP programmes.

Committee members then asked various questions of Mr August and Ms Abrahams. Mr Mathapelo Siwisa said you have spoken about what you intend to do, but you have not spelt out the sanctions for those found liable for flaunting these guidelines and policies. Ms Abrahams replied: As a department, we will tighten our oversight of these principles and we will ensure that we enforce the norms and standard that flow from them.”

 Another question was asked about community participation in formulating the guidelines and policy framework. Ms Abrahams responded: “These workshops were a mixture of councillors, communities and Nedlac. Nedlac is a critical constituency regarding this programme.”

Most members decried the fact that a rotational system for employment on this programme. Ms Abrahams answered: “We are in a process of incepting a database to monitor this anomaly and to avoid it from recurring. We are also aware about it because we monitor media and we actively present on social media platforms where such a matter is often raised.”

Is there an exit strategy for the participants of this programme, asked Ms Samantha-Graham Mare. Ms Abrahams replied: “That is a dilemma. We often ask ourselves where do people exit to when the economy is not growing. In reality, we intended to have people coming in and out of the programme, but because of high unemployment rate its pipeline is now blocked.”

 Responding to that, another member of the committee, Ms Madeline Hicklin, interjected, that the major problem of this programme is that it was meant to be an upskilling platform for proper employment, but is now it has repeat recipients that go from one programme to the other. Ms Abrahams replied: “We now utilise the labour survey to track the transition of the participants of this programme to real employment, most of whom are participants who acquired skills through this programme and are now permanently employed. As such, this programme still serves its desired intent as an upskilling programme for real employment.”

The Deputy Minister of Public Works, Ms Noxolo Kiviet, agreed with Mr August that the programme is political manipulated. That is the fact of life. “But we are working to deal with this human element that undermines the objectives of the policy of this programme meant to alleviate poverty.”

One of the strongest elements that will be contained in the coming Public Works Bill, “will ensure we limit the negative influence of the human element in the implementation of this programme. Our constitution implores us to be fair and there’s justice in what we.”

According to the chairperson of the committee, Ms Nolitha Ntobongwana, as long as there is no Public Works Bill in place, the programme will face challenges with enforcing fairness, transparency, accountability and ethical conduct. This needs to be addressed because this programme is meant to alleviate the plight of the vulnerable people in our society. “As a committee, we are keen to get quarterly reports on the progress of the department in addressing all the factors this programme is faced with.” And that should be done with urgency “because this programme is one of the vehicles meant to create jobs for many South Africans who are currently unemployed. We should not dare fail them.”

Abel Mputing
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