

## **Inter-governmental collaboration needed to save tourism sector and economy**

*By Hannah Shameema Winkler MP - DA Member of the Portfolio Committee on Tourism*

During the throes of Covid-19, on a tourism portfolio committee meeting where stakeholders were invited to participate, a business owner from the tourism sector sobbed as he relayed how he had been forced to let many of his desperate employees go. I will never forget the feelings of desolation that this gentleman's response elicited in our committee and neither will I forget the sense of urgency that hung thick in the air. In stark contrast, an atmosphere of lethargy seems to have permeated the Tourism Department and its two Ministers – one come and one gone – that speaks to an entrenched disconnect between the ANC government and the people of South Africa.

On Monday during a portfolio committee meeting, Minister Sisulu lavished self-congratulatory accolades on herself and the Department. She claimed that she had been invited onto numerous international fora to discuss best practice on how SA managed to shield the tourism economy from the devastation caused by the pandemic. I honestly don't know whether to laugh or cry at this statement considering that the sector has been so colossally let-down by the ANC government that hundreds of businesses remain closed down and thousands are still unemployed.

The aforementioned gentleman is one of the 50 000 tourism businesses that has had to either temporarily or permanently close and lay off staff due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The DA had flagged the potential for misuse of relief funding, suggesting a rigorous audit and oversight process with a transparent database of payments. Needless to point out, this was not implemented and R13 million was incorrectly paid out through the Tourism Relief Fund and the Relief Fund for Tourist Guides. When I think of these mismanaged relief funds, I wonder what this Department and its Ministers would say if they were to face that gentleman and his dismissed employees. The Department has allocated R311 million to the working for tourism expanded public works programme – that is, 12 370 work opportunities that impart very little skills development for long-term employability. What a waste of R311 million. Surely, this Department can do better.

The issues that beleaguer the tourism sector did not begin with, and do not end with the Covid-19 pandemic. The tourism sector has always grossly underperformed considering its potential as a driver of economic growth and job creation.

Topping the pops on the main barriers to tourism are ease of entry, infrastructure collapse, crime and now threats to tourism from climate change.

The eventual roll-out of e-visas to 14 countries in February 2022, was a significant step in the right direction. But we can really not afford to drag our heels any longer on the roll-out to the rest of the world. Growth has slowed to a snail's-pace and opening borders by easing travel could see a welcome injection into the economy. Minister Sisulu, you must exert due pressure on the Minister of Home Affairs to speed-up the number of countries with access to e-visas.

Moving onto infrastructure – the state of infrastructure in South Africa is a very real threat to tourism. No-one, and I mean no-one, is going to visit coastal towns and cities where water quality is so atrocious that authorities have to frequently shutdown areas because of the amount of human faeces in the water from sewage leakage. As I speak, the beaches in Ethekewini along Durban's famous Golden Mile have all been closed – and this is not just because of the recent storm. Beach closures are an occurrence far pre-dating this storm, because waste water infrastructure has all but collapsed in Durban. The tourism hotspot

known as Wilson's Wharf, once a thriving hub of charter services, yacht clubs, restaurants and vendors, has become a veritable ghost town. I spoke to the owner of a signature restaurant on the waterfront who has called me many times in frustration because of the stench of raw sewage that wafts through his restaurant whilst people are eating, or reports of a blanket of plastic pollution and other debris on the water's surface. The Duzi canoe marathon is another travesty in sport tourism. This renowned canoeing event has been marred by reports of paddlers continuously falling ill – a condition colloquially dubbed as Duzi guts. Any guesses as to why? Yes, you guessed it. Dangerously high levels of faeces in the water.

And now to the irony: the Department has placed significant emphasis on promoting tourism in towns, dorpias and villages in its programmes; but the roads in many rural areas have deteriorated to such an extent that they serve as an active hindrance to any tourism. I know that the road to Underberg in KwaZulu-Natal is so laden with potholes that many tourists' vehicles and tourism service provider's vehicles have been damaged. Many tourists have now chosen to visit other areas and lodgings with better road infrastructure. For tourism operators in the area the obstacles to eking out a livelihood become more insurmountable by the day. They are now enduring power blackouts and water cuts frequently too. It would sound outlandish, if it weren't for the fact that this is a story that not only people in Underberg live through, but in fact one that resonates with many South Africans.

International travel advisories warn travelers to exercise caution due to high levels of crime in South Africa, including murder, robbery, car-jacking, rape and other violent crimes. They tell visitors to never walk around alone (especially after dark), drive with car doors locked and windows closed, and not to display cash or valuables. They also tell you to avoid certain areas. South Africa has the unfortunate accolade of being regarded as an unsafe country to travel to despite the fact other countries possess far higher murder rates. The Minister would do well to engage with her international counterparts to dispel misconceptions that thwart tourism to South Africa, alongside increased visible policing and other interventions in crime hot spots.

If the Tourism Department continues to work in isolation "outside of an all-of-government" approach the Department's efficacy will be undermined. Cross-departmental and inter-governmental collaboration is imperative if the recovery and growth of the tourism sector is indeed an objective of this Minister and her Department.

The cross-collaboration will prove even more critical in the wake of climate change impacts that will precipitate the collapse of the entire tourism economy if the sector doesn't plan to adapt it will lack resilience to climate shocks. Coastal towns that depend on tourism are at risk from rising sea-levels, and as temperatures increase water resources and biodiversity are increasingly under threat. Further to this, extreme weather events, more severe and frequent, are likely to wreak havoc. As we are continually hammered by extreme weather events as seen in KZN and Eastern Cape, our ability to bounce back will become near impossible. The Climate Change Bill lacks teeth in certain respects that will have dire consequences for the tourism economy and our economy at large. The Bill's shortcomings include inadequate compliance and enforcement provisions, missing sectoral targets and carbon budgets – without these inclusions the incentive to curb harmful emissions is anaemic. Minister Sisulu, as the Minister of Tourism in this country, you have the platform; please use it to exert the type of pressure that would give this Bill the teeth it needs to protect the tourism economy. There are only a few moments in history where one may be asked to stand tall in conviction and courage; don't allow this opportunity to pass you by.