

Until government revisit its priorities, SA Research and Innovation will remain in crisis

By **Nomsa Marchesi** - DA Member DA Member of the Portfolio Committee on Higher Education

Honourable Chair,

Our fight against Covid 19 continues! With the number of those dying from this pandemic rising daily, we can't help but be alarmed and as the slow vaccination pace has become a grave concern to our citizens!

On behalf of the DA, I would like to express our heartfelt condolences. May those who lost the battle against this pandemic rest in peace.

Honourable members,

Our struggle is not only against this pandemic, it is also against unprecedented unemployment especially amongst our youth.

The truth is our future is grim and until 674% of our population is vaccinated, resuscitating our already ailing economy will be a mammoth task!

Yet, we are a country that is known for a pioneering heart transplant, the Country that is known as the first town in the World to have street lights, a Country that had an opportunity to lead in Laser technology and the list goes on.

However, of late we are making headlines as a country with a corrupt government that is captured, lack accountability and one with the slowest pace in rolling out the vaccine in Africa, surpassed by Zimbabwe – absolutely incredible!

You see Chair, South Africa does not lack the know-how or the appetite to lead in technology and innovation, we don't have a shortage of expertise. Our Universities, our research centres like the CSIR's, the Human Sciences Research Council and together with a youthful nation we could be Africa's economic power engine. All we need is an enabling Government that will adequately fund science and innovation to achieve our economic transformation.

Science and Innovation should be at the centre of our Economic growth, international procurement by the state must be in consultation with this department to have continuous check and balances of what we can produce and what warrants International procurement and how to meet the gaps.

Until our state develops an entrepreneurial mind shift, only then we can succeed as a country.

Honourable chair, there is a lack of faith in South African- made products nationally and the reality is that the same Government that is spending Billions on R & D does not have confidence in homegrown products. This Government would rather place an order for overseas technology than from our own companies. For example, CSIR developed prototypes of housing development which are in Claremont, which are affordable and prototypes of low cost and durable roads. But yet, there is no uptake by Government to implement those discoveries, it is unacceptable, to be buyers of what is out there when we can produce locally.

I have to say there has been groundbreaking policy ideas on paper like the local manufacturing of API (active pharmaceutical ingredients), the establishment of Ketlaphela Pharmaceutical was one of them and with the Government pulling out, Ketlaphela has yet to produce one API. Without Government support, it could not meet its operational commitments.

Shockingly, in 2019 Cyril Ramaphosa's Presidential Health Summit called once again for the establishment of a competitive state pharmaceutical company to "de-commodify essential medicines supply" – this is the typical double talk we have become accustomed to with this Government – one step forward and two-step backwards.

The other one included the ongoing Safe, clean, cost-competitive, versatile, adaptable, and green energy initiative. The South Africa's Pebble Bed Modular Reactor (PBMR).

A Research and Development project which was started in 1993, a nuclear reactor design with a staff complement of more than 1000 people at universities, private companies and research institutes.

The government formally withdrew its support of the project when it was ready to be rolled out. We could have been major producers of energy in Africa and yet this Government started to entice us with the Russian Nuclear Deal when we could have had a South African deal! Instead, this Government rather opts to use the super-polluting Turkish Kar-Powership fleet which has left Lebanon bone dry and reportedly arrived in Durban for an alleged period of 20 years for electricity supply.

Then in 2010 again, true to its nature, the Government announced plans to provide Energy Security as one of the five strategic outcomes. South Africa was to supply the World with Hydrogen Fuel Cell Technology by 2018, a Ten-Year Innovation project. It is now 2021 and there is no sight of this technology being used.

One thing that we have to commend you on Minister is the Tax incentives, which many companies are taking advantage of, the only glitch is the turnaround time for SARS's application approvals and also, to encourage smaller Provinces to take advantage of this initiative.

Finally, Honorable chair, the budget cuts in this Department is concerning, the SA investment in R & D currently stands at 0.8% of gross domestic product (GDP) and the budget cuts specifically on Program 4 in R&D alone of over R1 billion is a setback on our set target of 1.5% by 2030. We will not meet our target! It will be difficult to meet this target if we don't stick to commitments and see projects come to fruition.