

Government departments must stop functioning in silos and develop inter-departmental ties, to everyone's benefit

By Tsholofelo Bodlani MP - DA Member of Parliament

The Government Communication and Information System (GCIS), is well on its way to turning a corner, after years of being used as an instrument for personal enrichment by the leaders in the ruling party. Noting the above, it is unfortunate that the GCIS is featured prominently in the Commission of Inquiry into State Capture headed by then Acting Chief Justice Raymond Zondo. To appropriate from President Ramaphosa in his SONA 2022, speech, after receiving the first two parts of the "Zondo Report", he said: "The first two parts of the report make it plain that there was indeed 'state capture'."

This means that public institutions and state-owned enterprises were infiltrated by a criminal network intent on looting public money for private gain. The president goes on to say, "The reports have detailed the devastating effects of this criminal activity on SAA, Transnet, Denel, the South African Revenue Service, and Government Communications." Unfortunately, due to a lack of political will in prosecuting these criminals, some of whom have not fled to Dubai, they are still out there, and we can only pray for divine intervention in dealing with such humans.

Let me place it on record that President Ramaphosa has done very little to bring stability to this department with the continued cabinet reshuffle, which has just added to the instability in the department over the past few years. That said, we now have a minister who has reached 19% of Presidential Performance Agreement targets. While the Democratic Alliance applauds the GCIS for the 7 consecutive years that it has repeatedly demonstrated sound corporate governance. It is apt that we make a clarion call to President Ramaphosa to do his part in stabilizing the Department and its entities.

We note that the 2021/22 financial year has been premised on the government's key priorities, as set out in President Ramaphosa's February 2021, State of the Nation Address. These priorities centred on defeating the Covid-19 pandemic; promoting economic reforms and recovery, building a capable state combating corruption; and of course, gender-based violence. The department plays an integral part in championing programmes which highlight the scourge of GBV. The DA is concerned about how these programmes will be compromised due to the budget cuts at a time when women of South Africa live in fear because of GBV and femicide.

The Department managed to reduce the vacancy rate from 8.44 per cent in the 2020/21 financial year to 6.32 per cent by 28 February 2022, with the three new Deputy-Director Generals (DDGs) who assumed duty on 1 March 2022. Overall, the Department experienced a turnover rate of 5.95 percent between 1 April 2021 and 28 February 2022. Noting that compensation of the Department's 541 employees in 2020/21 was the largest expenditure item, comprising an estimated 38.3 percent (R844.9 million) of the total budget over the MTEF period, the DA categorically states that it is NOT the responsibility of the state to create jobs, but rather, as research has shown, the government should strive to create an environment suitable to economic growth and indeed jobs. Nonetheless, we do need to state our support for public servants to earn competitive salaries to avoid having the government used as a training ground

for the private sector — leading to brain drain in the institution as well as a drop in institutional knowledge. The DA supports the endeavours of the department to professionalize government communication and making it as cost-effective as possible. This can be achieved if the departments streamline its processes and get rid of deadwood and political appointees who just burden the system.

The recruitment of 22 graduate interns in line with the Presidential Youth Employment Programme during the 2021/22 financial year with the aim of alleviating unemployment amongst young graduates and providing opportunities to gain work experience is welcomed. In the same breath, the DA cautions that these opportunities should be given to persons on merit AND NOT on political affiliation as is the norm in government.

While the Vuk'uzenzele newspaper is distributed digitally and physically countrywide and is the only national publication that is focused on the government's key priorities, with an emphasis on service delivery programmes and the opportunities created by the government, we are worried that the department has no measures in place to monitor its impact, only focusing on stock levels as opposed to the impact of the distribution mechanisms and that of the message.

This is worth noting, especially considering that over the medium term, the Department plans to produce 30.6 million copies of Vuk'uzenzele at an estimated cost of R75 million to R50.4 million per year for printing in the Products and Platforms subprogramme and R24.6 million per year for distribution in the Communication Service Agency subprogramme, both in the Content Processing and Dissemination programme.

GCIS states that despite the cuts in the budget, they remain focused and dedicated to communication that enables South Africans to change their lives. The DA hopes that the planned stakeholder engagements will help strengthen ties with the sector so they can add their contribution to the development of government communications.

We call on the department to urgently attend to the current state of the Department's studios and the Imbizo Centre, located within Parliament which is no longer utilized as a result of technological infrastructural challenges, this is to avoid a white elephant which has cost taxpayers millions of Rands.

In the quest to reach the ever-elusive 4IR, the department must be methodical in its efforts to respond to the issue of Hard-to-Fill Skills relevant to the Department and broader communications environment as developed in 2021/22. The DA welcomes the department's commitment to the WSP of 2022/23 as it continues to prioritize training in areas such as Artificial Intelligence; Business Intelligence; Cyber Security; social media and Digital Marketing and Foresighting and Forecasting, noting that E-learning programmes will be encouraged to minimize physical contact.

Regrettably, the impact of the prolonged and unjustifiable national lockdown will continue to be felt by the man on the street as institutions such as the GCIS try to regroup...

South Africa can achieve more if government departments stop working in silos and strengthen inter-governmental and inter-departmental relations so each can benefit.

I thank you!