

Lack of leadership and incompetence at the heart of DSD failure – not Covid-19

By Bridget Masango MP - DA Shadow Minister of Social Development

Honourable chairperson,

Way before the Covid-19 lockdown, the Department of Social Development (DSD) acknowledged and told the country that *“in 2018, close to one million households had severely inadequate access to food and another 2.5 million households had inadequate access to food”*. Armed with this acknowledgement, the Department would have harnessed any partnership to ensure that during the lockdown, all possible, safe, and well-coordinated efforts are made to reach them by now more people in need of food.

The opposite happened; the controlling streak of the Department came to the fore. Under the infamous draft directions, the Department demanded that food distribution would require permits from the DSD with the exact number of people to be fed submitted to it before and after the distribution of food.

Willing and eager civil society organizations were left with their hands tied while a huge population of hungry, locked down, unemployed South Africans languished in hunger and starvation. This was after predictions had been made about food insecurity numbers skyrocketing during the Covid-19 lockdown.

It would take the Democratic Alliance (DA) and NGOs to go to court to free well-meaning and patriotic South Africans to distribute food to the neediest and vulnerable.

On the 3rd of July, the Deputy Minister of Social Development said, *“Children’s rights are absolute, they are not within progressive measures, the children’s Act is clear.”*

On the 17th of July, Judge Potterill would say the following, while delivering a scathing Judgement on the opening of the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP): *“For now, I ask no more than the justice of eating.”*

This is an apt saying by a judge who would have been presented with heart-wrenching testimonies of parents and siblings of poor children whose cries for basic food had been heeded by civil society. This can be said for the unemployed who had to depend on DSD, via the SRD grant and food parcels for a living.

These are the people who were in the informal economy and were eking out their living by daily going out to do what is known as piece jobs due to already high levels of unemployment.

The SRD grant announcement by the honourable President on the 21st April was hailed by many as the saving grace for the many who had joined the ranks of the unemployed due to the lockdown. The first 10 people to receive the grant received it on the 15th of May and it would be months before any other hungry beneficiaries would see that money. To date, only the May grant of R350 has been disbursed.

There is not sufficient time in this mini-plenary to list the bungling, delays, incompetence, lack of planning, etc. But the report of this portfolio committee is riddled with *“the committee has raised*

with deep concerns” to illustrate the frustration with the Department’s routine failures to do its work in serving the poor and vulnerable.

Honourable Chair, stats on the effects of the department’s failures are staggering:

For example, according to the recent Stats SA report, about 6 out of 10 children in SA are said to be multidimensionally poor. These are children who are deprived of what is considered to be at least 3 out of 7 dimensions of well-being.

In June 2020, the Department told to the committee that 14 million South Africans were food insecure. In the same presentation, the Department acknowledged that 5.2 million of the 14 million people had been reached by Government response to hunger. A staggering 8 million people had not received food relief from the government.

Concluding that the Department has dismally failed in its constitutional responsibility to provide food to the hungry is in order – a powerful indictment to the Minister and the Department.

Honourable Chairperson, whenever South Africans have faced a challenge or crisis, they have been reminded of how resilient they have been. No amount of resilience will stand against the reality of there being no means of putting food on the table for your family for weeks and months as your ability to eke out a living has been curtailed to fight a deadly virus.

It is worse when you know that the very public representatives who are supposed to coordinate the distribution of the food relief are implicated in either redirecting it to selected people or even selling it to the very locked down and therefore deeply vulnerable members of communities. That will try any amount of resilience!

The skyrocketing levels of gender-based violence, substance abuse, abandonment of children have not been adequately prioritized by the government. The portfolio committee has been asking for plans and updates on developments to no avail – this while the country has been gripped by this equally devastating pandemic. The allocation of sufficient social workers to deal with this scourge has been met with excuses such as Treasury not allocating sufficient budget.

While the honourable Minister Lindiwe Zulu has publicly confessed that *“we are in unchartered waters”*, and that *“no one could have anticipated this outcome”*, she, and her Department’s actions to respond to the unchartered waters and the outcomes she refers have often exacerbated the very outcome she is concerned about.

It would be late June when the Minister even mentioned in her speech that her Department needed to respond with agility to the storm. This, honourable Minister is too late, and it is rendering the poor and vulnerable casualties, and not beneficiaries, of your Department’s services.

In conclusion Chairperson, adverse court rulings, cost orders, and judicial supervision along with research findings on hunger and services to the poor and vulnerable confirm that the needs of the poor have been denied during the lockdown. Unless addressed, the DSD’s notorious lack of funds and resources, distrust of its own service providers, reactive stance, and lack of accountability will mean it won’t be able to act in the best interest of the very sector of society it has the honour of serving going forward.