

Science and Technology Department needs all the support it can get

By **Annelie Lotriet MP** – DA Shadow Minister of Science and Technology

Hon Chairperson, I served on the portfolio committee of Science and Technology during the fifth Parliament and in preparing for this budget speech, I went back to my last speech in 2018. I then concluded by quoting the astrophysicist Neill de Grasse Tyson:

“Innovations in science and technology are the engines of the 21st-century economy; if you care about the wealth and health of your nation tomorrow, then you’d better rethink how you allocate taxes to fund science.”

And here we are in 2021. The world and the country are experiencing one of the worst pandemics in recent history. All across the world and in South Africa, the immediate reaction was – what do the scientists say, how can science help us?

Internationally there was a scramble for getting vaccines developed at unprecedented speed, medical practitioners, medical staff, and scientists were and still are at the forefront in helping us fight this pandemic. They are the heroes.

At the same time as the world fights against the Covid pandemic, it also faces the ever increasing challenge of climate change. Climate change is not going to magically disappear. It needs research, it needs science, and it needs innovation as a matter of urgency and with great speed. There is no time to waste.

We are becoming increasingly aware and are subjected to the very real reality of water shortages. Not the kind of shortages as a result of poor service delivery in most of the municipalities, but the very real danger of our water resources diminishing due to climate change.

We need scientists to conduct research and innovators to provide us with solutions for mitigation and adaptation.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is a term that has been popular in Parliamentary speeches and in government plans. It is then with total disbelief that one sees the photos of hundreds if not thousands of hard copy applications for firearms stacked up to be manually processed by the SAPS. Where is the Fourth Industrial Revolution? Reality is the Fifth Industrial Revolution is here, but South Africa is still grappling with the Third in many instances.

It is against this background and the timeous warning I quoted at the beginning of my speech that it is inconceivable that the budget of the Department of Science and Innovation has been slashed by almost 14% in real terms from fiscal 2020/21. For 2022/23 and 2023/24 it is estimated that the budget will yet again be slashed in real terms by 2.02% and 3.13%, respectively. For years we have been pleading for an increased budget for Science and Innovation.

Fiscal year	Budget	Nominal change	Inflation	Real change
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2017/18	R 7 596 300 000,00			
2018/19	R 8 013 500 000,00	5,49%	4,60%	0,89%
2019/20	R 8 172 300 000,00	1,98%	4,20%	-2,22%
2020/21	R 7 278 300 000,00	-10,94%	3,00%	-13,94%
2021/22	R 8 933 300 000,00	22,74%	4,20%	18,54%
2022/23	R 9 128 000 000,00	2,18%	4,20%	-2,02%
2023/24	R 9 244 600 000,00	1,28%	4,40%	-3,12%

However, science is still treated as the Cinderella. It is still viewed as a nice to have and something we do on the periphery.

A golden thread that runs through the Department and its entities presentations is that of uncertainty of financial sustainability. Income losses are a reality that could impact their core functions. It is becoming increasingly more difficult for entities to reach their targets due to inadequate resources.

It is also important to note that a reduction in the research budget results in researchers having to rely more and more on outside contract research. This keeps research alive, but the focus area is determined by the sponsor. At this point we need local research focussed on local issues.

Minister, I think the scientific and technological community should know whether you put up a fight for Science and Innovation in Cabinet and with the Minister of Finance? Did you point out that science and innovation is at the centre of all progress and development, be it social or economic? That science and innovation will play a key role in our economic recovery after the pandemic? Did you fight for science instead of supporting bailouts for failing SOEs? This will be crucial to create an environment that will attract investment.

This is a department that needs all the support it can get. Year after year we praise and congratulate the department for the extraordinary work they do. Year after year the budget decreases in real terms or even across the board cuts. Surely this shows that science is not the government's priority.

Minister, what have you done to ensure that the research done by the department and its entities are taken up by your fellow ministers? Why is there such a low uptake? To what extent has your ministry created and encouraged an inter-ministerial and inter-departmental approach to science and technology?

These are matters that have to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Science and Innovation can no longer be neglected, it has to be on the forefront as we navigate the changing world around us. Future generations depend on our actions now.