

Innovation lies at the heart of charting a new path for SA's prosperity

By **Phumzile Van Damme MP** - DA Member of the Portfolio Committee on Communications

Honourable Chairperson,

It can no longer be business as usual in government, because it is times unusual.

As governments across the world have evolved with the challenges that the global pandemic has presented, ours remains stuck unable to do the very basics of service delivery.

On the frontier of digital transformation, we lag far behind.

And to compare apples to apples, other African countries have embraced e-governance and accelerated digital transformation to cushion their people against the socio-economic and healthcare blows of Covid-19.

Here are a few examples.

When the pandemic hit Togo, its government quickly assembled a system to support its most disadvantaged with mobile cash payments. It used machine learning algorithms to detect signs of poverty in satellite photos and cellphone data.

Rwanda used robots to minimize human-to-human contact to protect its frontline and healthcare workers.

In Ghana drones were used to collect test samples from healthcare facilities in rural areas, and deliver them to laboratories in the country's two largest cities.

In Sierra Leone a Quarantine App was created to log and track, in real-time, date in and expected date out of quarantined persons, food delivery, psychosocial support and other services.

Many others on our continent used the pandemic as fresh impetus to invest in innovation and put the right policies and strategic frameworks in place.

What is stopping the South Africa government?

It is a lack of political will.

It is a lack of innovative vision.

The fact of the matter is...

Innovation lies at the heart of charting a new path for South Africa's prosperity.

Innovation will provide solutions to the old problems facing our country.

Innovation will provide the economic opportunities to recover lost GDP and create jobs.

Innovation will ultimately provide South Africa's disruptive moment towards lasting change that will improve the lives of our people.

Chairperson, I do not aim to merely speak of the problems, but also offer solutions.

As a start, a Chief Innovation Officer must be appointed whose primary responsibility will be to manage the process of digital transformation and change management across government.

A Council must be set up whose focus will be making sure that our legal framework can adapt quickly for new technologies to be adopted.

Government must actively identify start-ups who have created technological tools to improve service delivery and enter into partnerships with those businesses.

However Chairperson, digital innovation can only go so far if the digital divide in our country continues to exist.

The gaps in internet access and coverage across the country will mean that digital transformation will only benefit a privileged few. The cost to communicate and access the internet remains too high. As long as this digital

divide remains, rural communities, the youth and low-income households will be excluded from reaping the rewards of innovation.

A very key point, and this important, unless government can provide basic service delivery such access to electricity, clean drinking water, sanitation, shelter, education and others, the digital solutions will be hamstrung.

Innovate and at the same time, improve service delivery.

Government must learn to operate in the new normal. There is no pre-Covid normal to return to.

The world has become digitized.

To the ANC I say, adapt or die at the voting booth.

To South Africa I say, at the voting booth do not give your support to a party that refuses to adapt, because for the human race, failure to adapt and evolve means death.