

The ANC is crippling Stats SA towards dysfunctionality

By Solly Malatsi MP - DA Shadow Minister of the Presidency

House Chairperson, as is standard parliamentary practice we are today debating the budget allocation for Statistics South Africa for the 2021/22 financial year.

The budget allocation for Stats SA, like those of other government entities and departments, provide us with all the evidence we need to identify how government funds its priorities and how serious it takes those priorities.

One would think that a critical institution that produces reliable statistical information which guides government policy interventions will be given all the resources it needs to do its work well.

On the contrary, this budget – like the 2020/21 financial year and the preceding year's one – is irrefutable proof that the ANC government does not take the work of Stats SA serious.

By continuing to underfund Stats SA as it has done for at least two decades now, the ANC government is crippling the institution year in and year out towards dysfunctionality.

The cumulative effect of this is that Stats SA will be compelled to abandon some its statistical reports as it has already begun.

In the 2019/20 financial the institution was forced to cancel or delay the Income and Expenditure Report and 25 other economic statistical reports.

Just last financial year, the Income and Expenditure Survey (Poverty Survey) and ISIC 4 projects were suspended.

As a result, key statistical reports which provide all of us with the real sense of the state of the nation were unavailable when they should have been.

In their absence, government propaganda and untested opinions opportunistically influence public perceptions of key socio-economic trends.

To provide some context of the volume of Stats SA's work, it releases over 250 surveys annually that provide evidence-based reports on unemployment, labour, income and expenditure trends and many

other critical socio- economic trends in different sectors of our country.

These reports are also widely used by the private sector, academics and non-governmental organization to influence their policy making processes.

Yet the R4.4 billion allocation for the 2021/22 financial year – which represents an increase of over R1.3 billion compared to the previous financial year - is too little to empower the institution to do its work as well as it should.

Notwithstanding this, we welcome the fact that a large sum of the budget will be spent on “modernising’ Stat SA’s operating model, “strengthening” statistical reforms and “conducting” the Census.

CENSUS 2021

Honourable members, the most prominent illustration of Stats SA’s ever growing capacity constraints is the census population count.

The democratic government initially aimed to conduct the census every 5 years. As we all know by now, the first one was conducted in 1996, followed by the 2001 edition.

In 2006, the period for conducting the census count was extended from 5 to 10 years because Stats SA did not have the capacity to deliver a “successful” census.

As many of you are aware, Stats SA was scheduled to conduct the periodic population census this year.

The DA is disappointed that the Statistician General has now postponed the census to 2022. More so given that he was previously on record adamant that Stats SA will be able to roll out the census this year adopting technological innovation.

While the COVID pandemic is a convenient justification for the postponement, the reality is that Stats SA’s historical underfunding, which has contributed to the high rate of staff departures from the institution, negatively affect its normal operations.

Be that as it may, it is encouraging that R2.1 billion has been ring fenced for the purpose of conducting the Census. To this end, we will conduct the necessary robust oversight to ensure that what is due to be spent on the Census, is actually spent on it.

VACANCIES

One of the long term consequences of government's failure to properly fund Stats SA is that the institution is struggling to retain the talent it has to meet its obligations.

The current vacancy rate is at 17% and projected to increase over the MTSF period in light of no provision to increase the spending on compensation of employees.

To aggravate the dire state of human resources, Stats SA needs to fill 135 critical posts to operate optimally.

That the institution is still capable delivering its truncated series of statistical reports in the midst of these massive staff shortages is testament of the fortitude of the remaining staff.

ALTERNATIVE FUNDING SOURCES

Honourable members, one thing is very clear: The future of Stats SA looks very dark based on its current funding model.

It is unsustainable for it to solely rely on government funding as National Treasury's budget allocations are nowhere near what it needs to do its work.

It's high time that the institution embraces the reality that it must find alternative sources of funding to protect the credibility of the statistics it produces.

If it hopes to improve the quality of those statistics and turnaround times for releasing them, it needs to secure sufficient funding.

If it fails to do this, its leadership must live with the reality that more and more reports will be

abandoned annually.

More of its staff will continue to leave for more properly funded statistics agencies. Ultimately, it will be left with too little to do instead of doing a lot more, well.

CONCLUSION

Honourable Members, the DA is under no illusion about the difficult financial situation that Stats SA has been put in by the ANC government.

We applaud the professional men and women who continue to do their work with distinction by producing reliable statistical reports.

I appreciate that as the portfolio committee we are doing all we can to pressurize and persuade the Presidency and Treasury to make more money available for Stats SA.

I, for one, don't want to spend the rest of my term repeating the same old cry that Stats SA needs more funding to do its work.

Deputy Minister, if there is one thing that will boost your legacy if you can achieve it, it's finding the money that Stats SA deserves.

If you do that, hopefully you will earn the promotion you deserve for your dedication to your work instead of being stuck in the shadows of an acting Minister who misses her department's budget vote.