

ANC government's persistent and pervasive weaknesses leave children starving and millions hopeless

By **Bridget Masango MP** – DA Shadow Minister of Social Development

Honourable chairperson, the report we are debating today, while ticking some boxes on the efforts of the Department and its entities, largely reveals, especially through the eyes of the Auditor-General, a historical culture of complete neglect of the people the Department and its entities are constitutionally mandated to serve.

One look at the issues sharply raised by the Auditor General on the APPs is enough to conclude that the Department itself has had inadequate capacity to function during what is probably one of the most challenging periods this country has ever faced. To mention a few:

- The payment of social grants – the red flags that were highlighted by the AG back in 2020 don't seem to have been resolved. The AG said then, *"SASSA's outdated, limited databases and inadequate verification controls resulted in people who were not in distress receiving the social relief of distress grant, while those who were in distress were sometimes unfairly rejected."* This, the AG surmised was due to the weak government control environment in which the relief funds had landed;
- The inability to finalise fraud investigations, with some cases dating to as far back as 2011 for irregular expenditure and 2013 for fruitless and wasteful expenditure;
- 83 contracts had expired in 30/09/2021 with no replacement contracts through the normal procurement or deviation process; and
- Payment of R316 million in 2014 to a service provider for services that were not rendered.

Honourable Chairperson, these deeply concerning irregularities are wide ranging and a clear indication of an entity whose systems and controls are inadequate to manage large sums of money, thus limiting chances of the intended beneficiaries receiving the relief they so desperately need.

The emergency SRD grant is managed completely online but the AG found that there are a number of weaknesses in the firewall that was recently implemented. How can this happen when cybercrime is so rife and so many people depend on these grants to survive. People who are frustrated and walk into SASSA offices are turned away due to the entire application process being online. As a support mechanism, email and telephone platforms are advertised for queries. These are not attended to, and people have testified, with proof, to holding on for up to an hour and then their calls are cut off. Emails are not responded to at all.

The shocking headlines and statistics of children dying of malnutrition fly in the face of announcements of billions of Rands meant for them, but the money lands in the hands of government employees, prisoners, company directors who benefit from government contracts, and even the dead. The only people who have not received this relief are the unemployed, the poor, the vulnerable and the NGOs who do sterling work in communities to look after the clients of this Department.

Getting back to the report of the AG after reviewing some of the Department and its entities' programmes; the situation is dire and the performance improvements are overshadowed by persistent gaps that render the Department and its entities paralysed and unable to provide the services so many millions who depend on them.

The state of disaster in poor households has not come to an end. The change in the approval of the SRD grant, using an act that predates the series of disasters that have landed millions of individuals and households in extended and deepening levels of vulnerability, is a slap in the face of poor people and a display of lack of care by the ANC government. It is astounding that an announcement of the extension of the SRD grant was made in February, due to high unemployment levels in the country but as we speak, applicants have not been paid and there is no indication of when they will be paid. There is no clarity on when, if at all, the reconsiderations of appeals dating back to August 2021 will be finalised and applicants paid or not.

Honourable Chairperson, the critical mandate of the portfolio committee to build an oversight environment that ensures a quality process of scrutinising and overseeing government's action in order realise the noble ideal of ushering a better quality of life for all people of South Africa is betrayed by the persistent and pervasive weaknesses of the Department and its entities. The Democratic Alliance will not relent in exercising oversight, no matter how challenging it may be.