**KZN EDTEA Budget Debate: Political indecisiveness, lack of clear economic principles have fundamentally damaged investment**

The KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs’ (EDTEA) proposed R3.4 billion 2022/23 budget is again largely a copy and paste exercise from preceding years – with much fanfare and many catch phrases coupled with outcomes that pack no real punch. All of this spells bad news for the long-suffering residents and businesses of our province.

Citizens from all walks of life and from diverse economic backgrounds gave the ANC a proper hiding in the 2021 elections, so much so that the ANC is technically no longer governing KZN, with most municipalities now governed by other political parties or in coalitions.  Given this bleak outlook, one would expect that the ANC would do some serious introspection. This is not the case though. Instead, it has stumbled from one bloody nose to the next and now faces its greatest enemy of all – investor confidence.

***KZN’s ailing economy***

The 2021 July riots and attempted insurrection by ANC factions, aided by unscrupulous criminals, was a clear message to KZN’s business industry that it does not care about them, as long as Jacob Zuma stays out of jail.  The public and business sector were even subjected to images of some of KZN’s most senior provincial leaders offering up our province, investor confidence, economic growth and stability – for one man. Once the die was cast, the ANC government made a ludicrous attempt to stop the mayhem, deploying an ineffective SANDF who cruised around in 30-year old-armoured vehicles while depending on local communities for food. Certainly, it was not the SANDF that stopped the riots. It was the private sector and communities standing together.

Sadly, the damage was already done, with KZN suffering a 3.7% increase in unemployment according to the Quarter 4 Labour Force survey. Today, unemployment hovers at around 32.4% while the expanded unemployment rate tops 48.7%. Coupled with an estimated R40 billion in destroyed assets, even Mogadishu started looking good to investors. This should sound a clear warning to the ANC in KZN that we are half a step away from another bout of violence and that provincial budgets now need to make a deep and impactful difference on society. Real change is needed.

***Basic principles ignored***

To address the various budgetary proposals, it is necessary to go back to the beginning of the sorry saga of ANC rule where the very basics of economic development have been largely ignored each financial year. These include;

• A strong transport network linking markets and manufacturing spheres;

• Water and electricity provision, particularly in rural areas where it is largely non-existent, in order to create jobs and;

• Provincial budgets that start moving away from support of largely peri-urban business into deep rural economies where fundamental empowerment is needed.

Then there are the ANC’s race-based criteria for investment, particularly tourism businesses, which has left thousands of people without jobs as Covid-19 kicked the economy in the teeth. This while detailed private sector studies giving relatively simple solutions to unblock Durban Port transport routes and enhance productivity have been ignored. The equipment at the port is so outdated, and turn-around times so slow that many vessels now opt to sail straight past Durban and deliver cargo elsewhere.

Yet another basic principle of economic development is securing and policing our commercial and residential areas. Yet after 28 years the ANC government has – through its own inaction – allowed thieves to literally steal cables, railway tracks, copper wire and road railing to scrap yards.

***Foreign policy – swaying with the wind***

The ANC’s foreign policy and its impact on investor confidence is another cause for great concern. While the president is torn between Radical Economic Transformation (RET) revolutionaries and sound governmental principles, KZN Premier, Sihle Zikalala, seems to sway with the political wind generated from within his own ranks. We all know what happens to people who sit on barbed wire fences.

The South African government did not even have the humanity to condemn Russia on an international platform for its acts of aggression. The questions that must be asked are: Does today’s ANC support the maimed and killed children and elderly in churches and basements? Does it support rocket propelled grenades, unguided missiles and cluster bombs being used against civilians? What about the mass rape of Ukrainian women? The ANC did not have the intestinal fortitude to speak up at the United Nations and has embarrassed our country with its spineless indifference while chasing investors from our shores.  It is this political indecisiveness and lack of clear economic principles that has so fundamentally damaged investment in KZN.

***KZN entities***

The dithering and procrastination is so advanced that the rationalisation of KZN’s entities has still not taken place years after being mooted. Legislatively speaking, The Environmental, Biodiversity, Protected Areas, and Human-Wildlife Interaction Management Bill, 2021, was submitted to the Office of the Chief State Law Advisor with discussions ongoing to obtain final certification of the Bill. It is envisaged that the Bill will be enacted in 2022/23 but whether this will happen remains doubtful.

Then there is the so-called rollout of broadband to further the ANC’s fourth industrial revolution rhetoric. Today there is no progress whatsoever. Why anyone would believe government on this one is a mystery when it can’t even supply water or cell phone signal to large parts of KZN.

Then there are the other failed promises by EDTEA. Despite massive calls for the regulation, taxation and streamlining of licencing procedures, the cannabis sector remains unregulated. But where are the biofuels, textiles and clothing that hemp industries could create? Our province has a golden opportunity to pull its economy skywards but the simple legislative framework is too complex and cumbersome for the ANC to translate into real opportunity for citizens.

The Dube Tradeport expansion seems to be progressing with a DA oversight revealing that the site has bulldozed and fenced. While there were a few people milling about but there were certainly no buildings or manufacturing taking place yet. The same applies to the Richards Bay Industrial Development Zone – another fenced and a flattened area but only a few sparse businesses dotted around the new project.

Concurrently, EDTEA may as well give up on supporting tourism given that it has largely failed to prosecute several municipalities that continue to spill billions of litres of sewerage onto our beaches annually. This is destroying our coastline, rivers and tourism growth.

***Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife and Rhino poaching***

Perhaps the biggest disgrace for this entity is its complete inability to fulfil its core mandate. As of the beginning of May, more than 100 critically endangered rhino have been slaughtered in KZN’s parks. Despite the best efforts of dedicated rangers who for years have languished under poor quality and insufficient uniforms, a lack of weapons and slashed anti-poaching budgets – this provincial executive has fundamentally failed in its duties.

The R854 million subsidy from EDTEA does not empower EKZNW to get boots on the ground and take down poachers. There is a war being waged in our Ezemvelo parks, yet anti-poaching task team budgets were stopped in the 2019 financial year. The 2022/23 budget is so dismal that, according to the so-called Green Book, EKZNW can only hope to meet its mandate in terms of its most basic operational costs. This is not good enough.

Meanwhile, helicopter operation budgets are largely spent chasing elephant back into parks, while offers from the private sector to help secure our natural heritage have been declined. Assault rifles have been stolen from rangers’ vehicles, corrupt staff plague the entity and communities are so fed up with Ezemvelo’s empty promises of help that they actively collaborate with poaching syndicates.

Critically, employing additional rangers seems impossible with EDTEA admitting that no vacant posts will be filled due to budgetary constraints. Again, the Department has ignored several DA proposals in this regard which include;

 • The formation of a cohesive and permanent anti-poaching task team coupled with specialist prosecutors and a court to stamp out poaching

• Internal Ezemevelo poaching operations being funded by an exponential increase in sustainable wildlife auctions and hunting packages

Ezemvelo is certainly not being helped by Premier Sihle Zikalala’s Office’s ongoing refusal to release KZN’s Report into Rhino Poaching – years after its completion. This cauldron of ineptitude, linked with the absence of proper political will to fundamentally transform Ezemevelo will lead to the extinction of our rhino.

The KZN administration has, for 15 long years, failed to exercise its proper oversight and executive roles within Ezemvelo. The extinction of a species will be remembered in history as yet another ANC failure while its budgets and leadership will be held accountable for generations to come.