

MD's Word or Two
By Patrick Kulati
September 2007

At last, DME responds to us!!

Something interesting happened as I was writing the first draft of this article. As you will read, I was taking issue with the Department of Minerals and Energy Affairs (DME) for ignoring our work, particularly the declaration that communities submitted to them. It was at that time that I received a letter from Mr Nhlanhla Gumede, Deputy Director General: Hydrocarbons and Energy Planning, responding to a letter I had sent to him on 23 July 2007. A day after, we also received a draft programme of the Energy Summit that DME will be holding in at the end of September 2007. But, before I share some of the contents of the letter and other things, let me share with you what I had written.

Need for government to respond to people's needs

In May 2007, the Public Services Commission (PSC) published its 2007 Report on the State of the Public Service in South Africa. In his foreword to the report, the Chairman of the PSC, Prof Sangweni wrote "*As a key implementation tool for the state, the Public Service is central to improving the standard and quality of life of South Africans*". According to the PSC press release at the time, the report '*looks at each of the nine Constitutional principles and values of public administration and then assesses how the Public Service has adhered to it in a manner that contributes to growth and development*'.

One of the constitutional principles says that people's needs must be responded to and the public must be encouraged to participate in policy making. After checking out the departments, the PSC found that "*there are pockets of good practice in the Public Service that promote citizen engagement*" However, they added that "*more still needs to be done to heighten the level and quality of participatory governance*".

Need for government to improve the scope and quality of citizen participation.

It further stated that the "*...findings indicate that the Public Service needs to do more to improve the scope and quality of participation by citizens in its work. The execution of participatory models requires a particular set of skills from public servants, such as the ability to negotiate, understand community dynamics and work with, rather than work for, communities. This would require the reorientation and re-skilling of public servants to address the challenges posed by working in such a context*".

The report further stated that government cannot single-handedly achieve and sustain growth and development. This has to be a collective effort involving different sections of the population, who, guided by the Proudly South African spirit, work towards a common goal. This means that for people to actively participate, they need to sense and believe that they are taken seriously.

Voices of Household Energy Consumers Must Be Taken Seriously

I am highlighting these comments because they are profoundly and immensely critical for our democracy to work for the poor people. For our Energy System to work in our country, government, and in this case, the DME must take seriously the voices and contributions of South Africans. In my previous article, I reported about our National Household Energy Safety Summit where the victims and survivors of energy related injuries as well other consumers of energy met, deliberated on their experiences and handed a declaration of demands to a DME representative. Even though they publicly committed themselves to respond to the declaration, until now we did not receive a single response from them.

As stated above one of the constitutional principles says that people's needs must be responded to and the public must be encouraged to participate in policy making. The action or lack thereof, by DME is a complete denigration of this principle. They have been promising a variety of things including that they will produce a paraffin safety policy, a Household Energy Safety Strategy, a

joint Awareness Raising Programme on Household Energy Safety and that they will communicate with us. Until now, none of the above has happened.

The democratic and developmental state context imposes on our government functionaries willingness to honour their promises, to respond to people's correspondences even if they disagree with them, treat civil society with respect and take seriously their mandates. The people of South Africa have given DME a mandate to look after our energy needs and resources and stay in contact with us in the meantime. Unfortunately, men, women and children in poor settlements of our country continue to suffer due to household energy related incidents because there no policy framework on household energy safety.

DME responds to Paraffin Safety

After writing the above, you can imagine, how delighted I was to receive Nhlanhla's letter. It is my pleasure to report that at last the DME has responded, albeit after a long delay. In the letter, Mr Gumede stated that "the collaborative relationship between DME and all stakeholders, including Paraffin Safety Association, on efforts to reduce injuries, incidents and deaths related to paraffin usage by creating an awareness and information campaign which promotes behavioural change among identified target audience is ongoing and would always be in integral part of the departmental policy framework".

He elaborated on their plans to develop a national strategy for the optimisation of household energy utilisation. He further confirmed receipt of the declaration of demands and promised that it "will receive full attention and the department will do everything it can to avoid such paraffin-related incidents and tragedies". We are delighted to at least receive this letter. However, we are still looking forward to the elaboration of plans and the actual implementation of these statements. This letter helped to somewhat renew our sagging confidence in the seriousness of the DME on this issue. Our confidence was further strengthened by seeing that household energy issues were included in the draft DME Summit programme that we received.

Energy Summit Programme contradicts the spirit of the letter

However, a day after writing the article, we received a revised programme of the DME Energy Summit. In it, discussions on household energy were completely taken out. This completely reverses the confidence that had been restored just a day before. This removal comes after household paraffin users had submitted a document to DME with the hope that their concerns will be discussed at the DME Energy Summit. Now we are left bewildered as to what is really happening. We have no idea about whether to trust DME's sincerity or not. We now doubt whether the issues of the communities will ever be considered. The atmosphere is now confusing. This morning, I wrote to DME to seek clarity and await their response.

Our newsletter is coming!!

I conclude with more good news. As part of our communications, we are working on launching our quarterly newsletter. The newsletter will deal with developments in household energy safety field and provide practical and useful information about what can be done in the households to prevent energy related accidents. We will report on events that happen and profile people and communities in our area of work, among other things. If you would like us to email you the electronic version, please send your request to: info@paraffinsafety.org.