

DME Energy Summit Engenders Hope for Low Income Households

By Patrick Kulati

We visit a burns unit as the DME Summit approaches

During August this year, I, together with our Eastern Regional Manager, Nhlanhla Mdadane and, Dehran Swart, our Senior Projects Manager, visited the Edendale Hospital burns unit in Pietermaritzburg. There we met Dr. Damian Clark and his team of doctors, nurses and professional staff. They took us through the burns unit and we saw burn patients in excruciating pain. They said they had about 80 burns patients spread across the hospital.

I will never forget the picture of a woman I saw there. Her whole back, the side and hands had burns that ate deep into her skin. She was covered in painful sores, turning and tossing, not knowing whether to sit or stand and writhing in excruciating pain. Unable to bear the intensity of pain whilst her wounds were being dressed, tears were streaming down her bruised face. She was burnt when a paraffin stove exploded whilst she was cooking. What made it worse was that she was not the only one. There were other women and children who were covered in bloodied bandages.

Dr Clark and his team told us that in other hospitals many people were losing their hands due to lack of expertise in burn injury treatment management. Their unit was receiving patients from other hospitals. They painted a grim picture of pain suffered by helpless victims. They highlighted the need for a preventative Household Energy Safety System.

DME Energy Summit takes place

So as I traveled to the Department of Minerals and Energy (DME) Summit which was held in Sandton, Johannesburg on 25-27 September, the picture of the woman was vivid in my mind. I remembered the testimonies that were given at our own Summit by people who had experienced similar predicaments. Fortunately, there was a space and a session within the programme to raise the issue of the Household Energy Safety.

The Minister of Minerals and Energy invited me to speak at the session with other panelists. We did our best along with others to highlight the plight of victims and survivors. We tried to show the damage done by lack of energy safety in low income households. We exposed the problems posed by lack of Household Energy safety Strategy. We distributed the People's Declaration on Household Energy Safety to everyone at the Summit including the Minister.

DME Minister Sonjica highlights need for paraffin safety

As the Minister took the podium on the last day, to deliver her closing remarks, I was thrilled when she highlighted the need and urgency for paraffin safety to be attended to. I was also glad that in the children's declaration the issue of the need to improve paraffin safety in our country was clearly highlighted. We are happy with this, however, we still to understand how exactly the minister and her department plan to give effect to this. From a practical perspective we are calling for the regulation of prepackaging for paraffin, the regulation of the whole supply chain of paraffin, the establishment and enforcement of paraffin appliance standards and the monitoring of our borders as we hear rumours that some Chinese appliance manufacturing companies are using countries such as Mozambique to flood the South African markets with unsafe and substandard appliances. We hope the rumours are untrue, but our government needs to be extremely vigilant in this regard.

Reflections on the DME Summit

So what is my reflection on the DME Summit? Well, I think there's some hope for Low Income Households energy users. I congratulate DME for holding such a crucial meeting so timeously. I think the Summit was a very important beginning of a consultative process with stakeholders. It was important because it started a whole review of the White Paper on Energy which came out in 1998.

It considered the new contextual issues that have arisen since 1998 such as rapidly declining global oil supplies, rapidly rising oil prices, global climate changes, impact and externality costs of our coal industry, and challenges with electricity provisions as demand continues to outstrip supply. It looked at the impact of the rapid economic growth, transport systems and infrastructural development on our energy resources. It looked at issues of security of energy supply not just for the industries but for households as well.

In the context of those big issues, I was particularly pleased that issues pertaining to the households were also discussed because it is easy for such issues to be sidelined. We vigorously pursued the issue of household energy safety, not just in terms of paraffin, but also other energy sources such as electricity and gas. So I am cautiously hopeful for the future.

A few concerns about the DME Summit

Having said that, I need to highlight some of the major concerns I had with the summit. The first one was the absence household energy consumers. People like the lady in KZN, should have been there to speak for themselves. The second concern is that it was not clear how the review policy process will unfold, over what timeframes and how the issues raised by delegates at the summit will be dealt with. For us, we intend to pursue a meeting with Minister Sonjica and her

department to take up these and other issues. I plan to request her to visit with us just one burns unit. I hope she agrees to this so that people like the woman at Edendale will have confidence that our government understands their plight and will implement the solutions we put on the table.

Till next time, God bless you.