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Elections and Household Energy Safety

During his State of the Nation address, President Kgalema Motlanthe announced that on 22 April 2009, our nation will hold its fourth national elections. The election landscape has since been in a spin as political parties stamp over one another to reach the eyes and ears of the voters. Political parties continue to announce their manifestos. Both the electronic and print media are abuzz with election issues. However, unlike Barack Obama's election campaign, energy issues have not featured prominently in the election campaigns I have seen. Even less is said about safety issues around household energy use.

Surely one of the key questions for political parties is what they will do to prevent energy-related injuries such as burns and ingestions of paraffin in poor communities? This is a key issue for the poor. Addressing problems after they have occurred is very costly for the country. So I have been spending some time listening to what is being said by politicians and reading some of the manifestos of political parties, particularly on energy safety. Predictably, very little is proposed, except a smattering on issues of energy efficiency, renewable energy and electrification. No doubt, these are important and need urgent attention, but so is household energy safety.

On 11 February 2009, the Minister of Finance, Mr Trevor Manuel, delivered his eagerly-awaited budget speech. He prefaced his speech by outlining what he called 'five enduring principles', namely:

- Protecting the poor
- Sustaining employment growth and expanding training opportunities
- Building economic capacity and promoting investment
- Addressing the barriers to competitiveness that limit an equitable sharing of opportunities
- And, in doing these things, maintain a sustainable debt level so that our actions today do not constrain our development tomorrow

Investing in the Household Energy Safety System can go a long way in addressing the Minister's principles. Poor people need to be protected from fires that ravage their communities with unbelievable regularity. Poor people's economic capacities and investments in their own communities are undermined by the energy-related fires that affect them. Some lose incomes from being absent from work while trying to rebuild their lives. Some of the money used to fight the fires could be used for development. So, one of the ways to address Minister Manuel's enduring principles is the urgent implementation of a Household Energy Safety System in South Africa.

The household energy safety issue needs a multi-pronged systems approach which would look at a number of variables. For example, proper and decent housing whose design accommodates the multiplicity of energy sources used in households; sufficient planning spaces between dwellings to prevent fires rapidly escalating to other houses when they happen and generally, an urgent need for strategies to educate the public on energy safety consciousness. It would also mean a wide-scale introduction of safe paraffin appliances,

packaging and labeling of paraffin, implementation of regulations and change of behaviour by the actual users.

Obviously, I am happy that most political parties have identified housing delivery as critical in their manifestos. I am extremely delighted also by Minister Manuel's announcement that "Housing and the eradication of informal settlements remain at the forefront of our infrastructure investment plans". So whatever structures are built should accommodate planning for the multiplicity of energy sources used in communities.

He also stated that "the largest adjustments to spending plans go to poverty reduction: R25 billion is added to the budgets of provinces, mainly for education and health care". What is required now is a mentality that is focused on integrated planning in such a way that poverty alleviation strategies address a number of issues simultaneously, including energy safety. Although the Minister did not provide any figures, I really welcome his decision that "additional funding also goes to consumer protection, the competition authorities and enhanced testing capacity of the SA Bureau of Standards". This means that there should be more resources to ensure that the appliance testing regimen is improved at SABS and more consumer awareness programmes on safety will be implemented.

The election period provides an opportunity for our leaders to emphasise one of the key issues that negatively affects poor people, namely, energy-related injuries. This is because these matters drain our resources unnecessarily. Preventative measures can be implemented without requiring new resources. Household energy safety goes to the heart of our developmental paradigm because it affects people directly. It is also an issue that needs political and government support. I am looking forward to seeing what the new government will do with regard to household energy safety.

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