

OPINION



SA'S WASTEFUL EXPENDITURE A SLAP IN THE FACE

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A MEETING between the Standing Committee on Public Accounts (Scopa) and the Department of Public Works (DPW) late last month revealed some shocking examples of wasteful government spending in which millions of rand were being spent on an elite group of government officials.

At the meeting, Scopa questioned the DPW about the purchase of four ministerial homes with a total value of R26 million.

This also included entertainment area upgrades – more specifically the development of braai areas at the homes of three ministers that totalled half a million rand.

During questioning it was revealed that there was no price cap set when buying ministerial homes, and in instances where the houses do not have entertainment facilities, the DPW had to cover the costs of building them.

Although the department received a lambasting, it was by no means the first time that this issue had arisen. In the 2017/18 financial year, the DPW spent R675 911 on building a braai area for one minister and R48 million on buying houses for six ministers at an average of R8 million a minister (Business Tech, November 19, 2017). And the list goes on.

Now, think about this for a second. Take all of this spending on lavish houses and entertainment areas (and don't forget that these will incur other peripheral costs such as rates, taxes and maintenance), pile on R163.5m that the country already spends on employing 35 ministers and 37 deputy ministers (Politics, May 20), add a couple more millions of rand for travel, entertainment and security, and all-in-all we are looking at an annual expenditure of billions of rand on an elite few.

Within the context of a fiscal framework that led government to “unavoidably” (Gigaba, 2018) increase VAT to mitigate a deficit of R50 billion, what the Scopa hearings have once again unearthed is that the government is privileging a few at the expense of a much larger, far needier citizenry, such as victims of abuse for example.

South Africa, as we all well know by now, is a country besmirched by high rates of violence against women and children. Shelters for abused women and their children are, for many, an absolute lifeline.

The majority of shelters in South Africa are run by non-profit organisations and many rely heavily on government funding to render much-needed, effective crisis intervention services to hundreds of thousands of women and their children every year. Yet, the funding they receive from the government to deliver this service is minimal and often restrictive.

Government funding to shelters is usually in the form of a per-bed or per-person contribution, which varies from about R50 to R67 a day (depending on the province), along with subsidies for shelter staff such as social workers and house mothers – the latter of whom earn less than minimum wage.

Some funding is also contributed to administrative and programmatic work. On occasion (again depending on the province) funding may also include a small contribution towards security expenses.

However, unlike ministers, the government very rarely (almost never) furnishes shelters with houses. They are also rarely supported with funding to cover infrastructure and maintenance expenses.

Since the State of the Nation address we've been promised by the new South African leadership that the government is committed to “lending a helping hand” to addressing our most pressing social ills. If government is truly serious about this – it needs to put its money where its mouth is. |

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