

COMMENT

Electricity woes

THE ANC in the Northern Cape has given an instruction to local authorities in the Province not to cut the electricity supply to indigents for non-payment of their bills to the local authority.

In theory, the electricity of indigents should never be cut.

Once a resident's application for indigent status has been approved, all his outstanding debts are written off. He then qualifies for free basic services.

Excessive water consumption and the non-payment of monthly rates can result in the debt owed by indigents mounting up over a period of time but, if properly managed,

indigents will never owe millions.

The classification of residents as indigents, however, is often not a neat, orderly process.

The recent Section 106 report found that 334 indigent persons in Kimberley are not citizens of SA, while 1 337 are deceased, 137 are state employees and 35 do business with government.

Something is obviously not right.

According to the report, the Sol Plaatje Municipality does not review indigent debtors to ensure that only households who qualify receive indigent subsidies, while those who do not qualify are receiving free basic services.

It recommends further that those who have received free services under false pretences should pay back the money, while government employees should be disciplined.

Be that as it may, there is still the bigger picture.

Yes, private households owe the most money to the Sol Plaatje Municipality – in excess of R1.2 billion. But what about government departments – their total bill to the

municipality is more than R713 million. It is easy to cut the electricity of the little guy in the street. He is helpless and desperately needs power to live so he is likely to find money wherever he can to ensure that his lights are switched back on. But while many residents are forced to take out loans to pay their municipal accounts, government departments are getting away with allowing their bills to mount up and nothing is ever done.

Apparently there have been various consultations and attempts to identify which government departments are responsible for what debt. No one really seems to know – certainly not the individual departments involved. Even the provincial legislature, reported to be one of the top six defaulters owing the SPM, is decrying its municipal bill, stating that it is being charged for rates on the entire erf and not just the section on which the legislature building is situated. If this really is the case, why hasn't it been sorted out long ago?

The provincial Department of Public Works and Roads owes the municipality R644 million, while the Department of Educa-

tion owes R13 million. This isn't small change and the bills keeps climbing every month.

In smaller Northern Cape towns, where consumers buy electricity directly from Eskom, government departments are regularly cut for non-payment – and within a day or two they manage to come up with the money.

What about businesses? In Kimberley businesses owe the municipality R209 million, however, the Sol Plaatje Municipality is not able to terminate electricity supply to large power users because the meters are too smart. So their debts also just keep adding up.

Then there are the meters that just don't work. There are an estimated 2 800 bypass, broken and stuck electricity meters. Just getting these sorted out will bring in an additional R6.9 million.

Let us also not forget about the amount owed by councillors and municipal employees. At the end of June, municipal employees owed the municipality a whopping R6.3 million, while councillors, who in terms of their Code of Conduct, are not allowed to be in arrears with their municipal accounts, owed R740 000.