

Culture of stealing Eskom blind

ROUTINE: TOWNSHIP FAMILIES FACING INEQUALITIES BUY INTO CORRUPT BEHAVIOUR

➔ **Illegal connections, bridged meters and bypassing the meter to avoid paying.**

David Dickinson

South Africans are still to see if the new dawn promised by President Cyril Ramaphosa will even break.

Long jail sentences for those who looted the country would be a good thing. But it's not yet clear if that will happen. One thing, however, is clear: there is going to be a harder line on nonpayment.

The bankrupt Eskom is increasingly cracking down on illegal but widespread nonpayment for electricity.

The problem is that this informal subsidisation is now integrated into household budgets. Tackling nonpayment will remove a mechanism that dampens anger in one of the most unequal societies in the world.

A range of goods and services are clandestinely "discounted" in post-apartheid South Africa. Metrorail passengers ride *mangober* (without tickets), TV licences are optional, municipal rates bills are ignored and *izinyoka* help themselves to Eskom's services without paying.

Izinyoka, Nguni for snakes, is a name for those stealing electricity, a term popularised by an attempt by Eskom to curb electricity theft. The slur is ignored.

Whether it's illegal connections from street lights, *tsipilwe* (bridged) meters, "ghost coupons" selling at a fraction of Eskom's tariff, or sophisticated house rewiring with power-heavy appliances bypassing the meter, the township home that pays for electricity may be the exception.

A clandestine system of transfer payment, with roots in

apartheid-era boycotts, has developed into routine behaviour on which many family budgets now depend. I have observed how these various forms of nonpayment have evolved into an informal transfer programme over the past 20 years of researching in townships in Gauteng and the Free State. It works as a supplement to official subsidies and social grants to assist the poor.

But it also has socially damaging effects, beyond the strain on the budgets of the state and state-owned enterprises.

It is inequitable with the size of transfers dependent on pluck – not need – and it is demeaning as beneficiaries must break legal and moral codes and then conceal these transgressions.

It also densifies the networks of everyday corruption. Eskom's attempts to check meters rarely achieves much, but rather opens up another layer of transfers: a bridged meter or an improbably high number of displayed units for which no receipt can be produced will be overlooked for a "cool drink", the ubiquitous euphemism for a bribe.

The unwilling "sponsors" of these transfer systems have their own bills to pay. Ramaphosa used his State of the Nation address to ask the small fish to pay up. The days of boycotting payment are over...

He has just repeated this message, calling on residents in non-paying areas to help make Eskom the world's "lowest unit cost producer once again by paying for electricity".

Much as the system of informal subsidies is illegal, given the looting of Eskom from above, it is easy for *smallanyana* (very small) thieves to justify their transgression. But the sticking point is not the moral arguments: it's the money. The bitterest conflicts are those fought over what has been won. Expect resistance.

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Households powerless as the bills – and usage – just mount up

► It's easy for a family to go through R20 of electricity a day. In winter, it's hard not to.
► That's R600 a month, less an indigent allowance of between 50 and 100kWh which would otherwise cost between R34.50 and R69 on Eskom's tariff. If someone is managing on a pension (R1 780), grants for children younger than 18 (R420) or on the extended public works programme (R1 850) that's not affordable. It's not much better if

the family breadwinner is being paid the minimum wage of R3 500 a month.
► Mathematically, R500-odd a month is affordable unless there is absolutely nothing coming into the household, but to pay Eskom in full something would have to be sacrificed.
► In January, it could be the children's school shoes. The cheapest pair from a low-cost retailer would be around R100 and the sports shoes R125.

Two children: R450 saved. That would almost do it.
► And there are still 11 more sacrifices before year's end.
► Such sacrifices will follow racial lines. The vast majority of those who can't pay are Africans. Statistically, the average white household earns five times that of black households. The likely profiling of poor, therefore primarily black or Coloured communities, in this crackdown should give cause for concern.

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