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Lindiwe Sisulu faces backlash over R900bn water master plan

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Water and Sanitation Minister Lindiwe Sisulu is facing resistance to her ambitious water “master plan”.
Picture: Palesa Dlamini

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Water and Sanitation Minister Lindiwe Sisulu is facing resistance to her ambitious water “master plan” as some of her Cabinet colleagues and chunks of the ANC parliamentary caucus say it was “rushed” and publicly launched without adequate consultation.

The plan is intended to bring some relief to the country’s water crisis and is expected to cost R900 billion over the next 10 years.

Sceptics in Cabinet, the department and the ANC told City Press the plan was rushed to ensure that Sisulu, who inherited a bankrupt and dysfunctional department, got a sizeable budget allocation for the plan in the next financial year, which starts in April.

Insiders say the lukewarm response was the reason many Cabinet ministers who could have made it to the launch of the master plan last week stayed away, despite being invited.

Only Public Works Minister Patricia de Lille attended.

However, officials in Sisulu’s office said the absence of ministers could have been due to scheduling conflicts.

The department’s spokesperson, Sputnik Ratau, said: “The minister, for the sake of her colleagues, wrote invitations to certain ministers who are in the cluster, which is why De Lille was there. Not all ministers could come because engagements are different.”

The five-year-old document was incomplete until Sisulu released it last Thursday, just six months after she took office.

To fund the master plan, the document pools budgeted resources from other departments in line with the estimated national expenditure framework and the Division of Revenue Act.

According to Sisulu's critics, the pooling of resources made it necessary for all Cabinet ministers affected to buy into the R900 billion plan before its contents were made public.

Sisulu's adviser and chief architect of the plan, Trevor Balzer, said it would only be during implementation that those elements that require a policy shift or policy changes would be taken to Cabinet for approval.

Asked last week whether there was any record of Cabinet approving the plan, acting Cabinet spokesperson Phumla Williams referred questions to the department of water and sanitation.

Last year, Cabinet merely "noted" the plan, but also gave approval for the department to take elements of the plan through a Phakisa process – a method that helps to deliver government programmes and projects faster and more efficiently.

A minister speaking on condition of anonymity said Sisulu was "naughty" to say the plan went through a Cabinet process in the previous administration for public consultation.

"We have pressure with water delivery in the country and nobody can deny that. But on her part, she was playing politics. Common decency would say she should have brought it back. We have a water crisis and it requires action. But she wants to force a budget process that allocates her money. The plan seems low on what the solutions are. Instead, it speaks a lot on all the big money we require to execute all that. And if you run it now, when the budget process is on, what is your reason? Clearly it is to influence allocation, especially because the department is bankrupt and the human settlements component of spending is done in provinces, so she is not in control of that budget."

City Press learnt that the ANC caucus in Parliament was also not impressed that they only learnt about the contents of the document on the day that it was being made public, which made consultation a mere formality as no new inputs could be brought in.

IT COULD BE A PROBLEM THAT THE PLAN IS LOOKING AT THESE MEGA PROJECTS WITH BIG BUDGETS WHEN YOU DO NOT HAVE THE MONEY AND CAPACITY FOR IT

President Cyril Ramaphosa

According to those who attended the caucus briefing by Sisulu's deputy, David Mahlobo, ANC MPs raised concerns about the budget and others were not convinced the department, in its dysfunctional state, would have the necessary capacity to drive the plan.

Mahlobo told the caucus that "it would take a long time to execute the plan because they are going to do it in a modular fashion, so it is not going to be in big projects, but small chunks."

President Cyril Ramaphosa also warned "it could be a problem that the plan is looking at these mega projects with big budgets when you do not have the money and capacity for it".

According to insiders, Ramaphosa said that, when such big projects failed, they became mega failures, so government had to instead think smaller.

He cited the costly failures during the construction of the Medupi and Kusile power stations as examples.

A plan in continuum

But Balzer on Friday said the plan had been discussed since 2014 at different times within the department, Parliament and Cabinet committees, as well as with external stakeholders in the past, adding that government worked in a continuum and could not be expected to stop and start when new people came into office.

Balzer said the process to start a master plan was first mooted in 2013 and started in 2014.

"We started with what we called an infrastructure investment plan. After that, it was decided that we move to the preparation of a more comprehensive water and sanitation master plan."

He said the process passed through former ministers Edna Molewa, Nomvula Mokonyane and Gugile Nkwinti.

“Government is a continuum, so we continue with the work as we see it through to its conclusion.”

Balzer said they first assembled a group of experts in the department who worked on putting the plan together. Later, a professional service provider came in to help with shaping and forming the plan.

Between 2017 and last year, the department embarked on consultations with stakeholders including government at national, provincial and local level, as well as with external stakeholders such as business, mining, energy and nongovernmental organisations.

“After consultations, at the point the document was in its eighth version, the portfolio committee responsible for water and sanitation was engaged. After that, the plan was taken through the management in the department, who are the same management in place at the moment.”

THE PLAN IS NOT A LEGISLATED REQUIREMENT, SO IT DOES NOT REQUIRE CABINET APPROVAL

chief architect of the plan, Trevor Balzer

Balzer said that the draft plan was taken to the social economic clusters in June last year, where the document was screened before it went to Cabinet.

A decision was made that it be referred to the Cabinet committee on the economy, which accepted it and thereafter approved it.

“Cabinet noted the plan and then gave approval for the department to take the plan further into a Phakisa process. The plan is not a legislated requirement, so it does not require Cabinet approval. But going through the Phakisa process required Cabinet approval because it decides what projects go through that process.”

He said there were three more external consultations under Nkwinti leading up to Sisulu’s launch last week.

“As we go through the implementation of the plan, the elements that will still have to go back to Cabinet are where there are any policy shifts. So there are various elements coming out of the plan that still have to go back to Cabinet,” said Balzer.

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He said an amount of R565 billion was already budgeted for, “which is further indication that a plan is a continuum and it is implemented over time, and the plan recognises work that has already been done – work that is already in budgets to be done – then we identify new work that would have to be funded”.

The R565 billion included allocations made to local government, to the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, and to provinces in terms of the available water budgets.

In terms of shortfalls, he said, Treasury would work with departments and other relevant stakeholders to see how shortfalls would be dealt with.

Balzer insisted there was no legislative requirement for Cabinet to approve the plan, “but, in terms of a Cabinet minister keeping his or her colleagues abreast of what is going on in their department, they go back from time to time and they report to Cabinet”.

Departmental spokesperson Makhosini Mgitywa said Sisulu was a caring minister concerned about the basic human rights of the poor and vulnerable: “She is only doing what is within her powers. If it has offended some people, it is regrettable. However, we do not regret going ahead with the plan.”