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Infrastructure backlog a needless mess

Infrastructure SA (ISA) is a classic of the Ramaphosa era. With a R600m budget "for project preparation", it was incorporated out of the infrastructure and investment office in the presidency to "review and align the mandates of the Presidential Infrastructure Co-ordinating Commission Technical Task Team (PICCT3) and the broader public institutional framework for the delivery of public infrastructure", it says on its website.

There is no better way to illustrate that nothing has been achieved than to further quote its website: "Headed by Dr Kgosiensho Ramokgopa, with minister Patricia de Lille overseeing the programme as its executive authority, ISA reports to the Presidential Infrastructure Co-ordinating Commission Council, chaired by President Cyril Ramaphosa."

In fact, De Lille moved to tourism in March, at the same time as Ramokgopa was appointed as the new electricity minister. There is a new minister of public works & infrastructure, Sihle Zikalala, who appears to have found the cupboard bare after taking office. Rummaging in the dusty corners of ISA he may have found what is visible to the rest of us: wibbly and incoherent word salads about strategic visions, planning, governance and "infrastructure scenarios". The website still proudly looks forward to a green hydrogen conference in November 2022.

But there is no infrastructure pipeline to speak of. What, indeed, has ISA achieved? The answer lies in the minister's reply to a parliamentary question. The dearth of progress is due to "infrastructure underspend due to poor project preparation and lack of capability and capacity in the public sector". In other words, due to ISA's previous leadership doing little of substance. The most recent report on its website describes a "two-day working programme" that "allowed ISA to gain infrastructure insights".

There are three reasons to worry about this. For starters, R600m should buy considerably more than drivel on a website. SA is crying out for efficient and accessible infrastructure to grease the wheels of the economy. But, so weak has ISA been that its current minister of public works & infrastructure understands why private sector investors are keeping a wide berth.

"Given the risks and uncertainties of project preparation, the private sector has understandably been hesitant to get involved during the early stages of infrastructure projects or programmes." He also cited gangsterism and crime. News24 reported, "It is important that government invests in project preparation," concluded the man running the government's R600m project preparation programme.

This investment gap leaves a R1.6-trillion hole in infrastructure that adds needless costs and friction to every facet of SA life. It has real-life consequences for ordinary people who want trains, roads and logistics that do the basics.

It is of great concern that ISA's inaction is the legacy of our current electricity minister. As timelines at Koeberg, Kusile and Medupi power stations slip, it is hardly necessary to say that his performance in dealing with the energy crisis at the heart of our economy's malaise needs to be on an entirely different level.