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**Author:** TEBHO SETENA

# Ongoing hardships cloud premier's vision

TEBHO SETENA

The Free State's burdens, namely unemployment, poverty and social inequality, were underscored during Premier Maqeen Letsoha-Mathae's delivery of her second State of the Province Address (Sopa) on Friday, 21 February. She delivered her address in the dome venue at the Lemo Mall Green Park in Bloemfontein.

Letsoha-Mathae's address is pinned on the following critical goals: to establish a driving force for inclusive growth and job creation; reduce poverty; and tackle the high cost of living and build a capable, ethical, and developmental state.

The provincial government is sharply criticised by opposing political parties on its inability to create sustainable employment, and the collapse of some government-led job-creation projects aimed at curbing rampant unemployment. This criticism comes amid a situation of bankrupt municipalities and allegations of corruption in departments.

Letsoha-Mathae expressed confidence that her executive council would continue to unleash the economic potential of the province. She pointed out that strides have been made to address rife unemployment through the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), despite it being fraught with challenges.

According to the latest Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS), for the fourth quarter of 2024, the official unemployment rate is hovering at



Premier Maqeen Letsoha-Mathae, flanked by Mxolisi Dukwana (speaker in the Free State Legislature) and Lt. Gen. Baile Motswenyane (provincial police commissioner) during the procession of the State of the Province Address (Sopa) on Friday. PHOTO FACEBOOK

37,9%, and the expanded unemployment rate at 44,2%.  
"During the first year of Phase 5 of the EPWP, we have created 19 792 job opportunities. The tide is turning – we have committed to creating 30 115 employment opportunities. In the next financial year, the EPWP is expected to support poverty alleviation initiatives, promote skills development, and improve service delivery," said Letsoha-Mathae.

According to her, the solution to

the province's unemployment crisis is in its ability to attract potential investments.

"Yes, we need inclusive growth, greater investment, higher income, better living standards, more jobs, less poverty, and reduced inequality in turning a new page in our province's economic journey."

The Free State's poverty level is underscored by more than 1 100 000 people, youths and adults depending on forms of social grants. The

province has a population of about 3 million.

"Importantly, social wage instils a sense of self-worth and responsibility. We are determined to lift people out of poverty and unleash their potential to thrive," said Letsoha-Mathae.

The number of young people in the province depending on the state's Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress grant of R370 makes up the largest number nationally, roughly

60%, according to the South African Social Security Agency (Sassa). The number was 586 165 in 2023, since the introduction of the grant at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

Dr Roy Jankielsohn, leader of the DA in the Free State Legislature, reacted with dismay to Letsoha-Mathae's 2025 Sopa having no blueprint.

"Rather than offering real solutions to the deep systemic issues that continue to plague our province, the premier resorted to the same tired narrative of hope and optimism, devoid of concrete action. It is clear that the ANC government has abandoned its duty to serve the people of this province."

"Instead of addressing critical challenges such as corruption, the decaying state of infrastructure, collapsing health institutions, and appalling financial mismanagement across departments and municipalities, Premier Letsoha-Mathae offered only isolated successes and vague plans without time frames and that fails to tackle these systemic problems head-on."

"It appears that the premier exists in a reality that differs from that of many impoverished, unemployed and desperate residents in the province," said Jankielsohn.

He has stressed again that the people of this province deserve more than promises.

"They deserve tangible actions and a government willing to make the tough decisions needed to bring about lasting change. The premier was right about one thing. They need to change their ways."