

Media Release

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SALGA NEC MEETS ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

As the country enters the second week of the national lockdown, the National Executive Committee (NEC) of South African Local Government Association (SALGA) convened a special video conference earlier this week to assess the State of Local Government's contribution to curbing the spread of the Novel Coronavirus. The SALGA NEC acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting all aspects of our society and require unprecedented action on the part of the government, across all three spheres, to curb the spread of the virus. The impact of the President's decision on the 23rd of March to direct a 21 days national 'lockdown' has far-reaching implications for municipalities, in particular, who are at the coalface of the delivery of essential services. The impact of the virus will be felt by municipalities far beyond the 21 day lockdown period.

Whereas the SALGA NEC is very encouraged that municipalities are strictly and without exception adhering to the range of directives issued by national and provincial government departments, in direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic, there are several areas of concern including matters related to the negative impact on municipalities of changes to regulations and related contradicting media pronouncement; the sustainable delivery of water to communities, the issuing of permits to informal food traders as well as funding mechanisms to cover the municipal response to the pandemic.

Changes to regulations and media Statements

It is evident that municipalities, due to their proximity to communities, have a central role to play in the government's response to combat the spread of the virus. As such, regulations and directives issued by respective Ministers, have a direct impact on the execution response of municipalities. Where these regulations and directives are changed at short notice and without due consideration of the practical implications, it negatively impacts on the municipal response. This is further exacerbated by the contradicting media pronouncements, during a time when tensions are high and may create confusion and have unintended consequences. Acknowledging that the country is dealing with extraordinary circumstances, which requires extraordinary action and responses, the SALGA NEC is, therefore, calling for a more coordinated response informed by meaningful consultation, particularly with organized local government as the collective voice of municipalities, on matters that materially impact municipalities.

Water Delivery

Water has been identified as a critical element in fighting infections and as such access to water services by communities is vital. SALGA welcomes the intervention by the Department of Water and Sanitation in the procurement of water tanks and tankers which are currently being deployed to municipalities across the country.

The SALGA NEC has however expressed the importance of sustaining the service delivery interventions far beyond the lockdown period and therefore is calling on:

1. The development and signing of agreements to regulate the transfer of the assets purchased by the Department of Water and Sanitation to municipalities, including the related budget commitments;
2. Using Budget prioritisation to address the capex and opex requirements to ensure sustainable service provision during the fight against COVID-19 and beyond;
3. Appropriate water sources, where necessary, should be identified including the operation and maintenance capacity; and
4. The expectations of communities on water issues must be managed post the 21 day lockdown period.

Issuing of Permits to Informal Food Traders

Following the relaxation of the regulations issued by the Minister of Small Business relating to the issuing of permits to informal food traders, the NEC is pleased that the relevant authority within the municipality, tasked with the processing of permits, has been clarified. Municipalities have been called upon to ensure that the relevant business units that issue these permits are opened and that staff is appropriately equipped and protected to limit their exposure to the virus.

Disbursement of the Disaster Management Fund to municipalities

The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed extraordinary burdens on the country at large and local government in particular. Added to this the fiscal ability to respond to the pandemic is constrained due to the prevailing economic conditions of the country. With short turn-around times to respond and respond with urgency to the pandemic, the SALGA NEC is calling for the disbursement of the disaster management funding to be efficient and agile in nature and it must assist municipalities to respond swiftly to the directives and regulations pronounced to combat the pandemic.

The SALGA NEC sponsors an approach of an upfront allocation of funds to municipalities based on equitable share modelling and further applying a vulnerability component which considers the short to the medium financial health of a municipality, its community viability, institutional capacity and state of municipal infrastructure. To this end, the NEC has proposed to the Minister of COGTA to consider the redistributive model that favours vulnerable municipalities.

The SALGA NEC welcomes the Minister of COGTA's proposal to reprioritize Municipal Infrastructure Grants for disaster-related purposes. The 21 day lockdown period occurring in the last quarter of the financial year-end of local government will impact negatively on major infrastructure projects and this will result in under expenditure of infrastructure grants.

The President of SALGA, Cllr Thembi Nkadimeng concluded the NEC meeting yesterday by re-iterating President Ramaphosa's call at the recently convened Presidential Coordinating Council that municipalities are required to sustain efforts to deliver services to South Africans post COVID-19 with the same passion and dedication displayed in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic.

Municipalities will continue to work in unison with provincial and national government to deliver essential services during this period. SALGA will continue to advocate and lobby on behalf of local government, to ensure that the sector is adequately supported and enabled to perform its function considering that it is the sphere of government that interfaces closely with communities.

ENDS

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