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Cuban engineers are not taking our jobs

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SOUTH Africans are passionate in their debates on any given topic. This passion is often on display on social media and call-in radio shows, where the exchanges are unscripted and spontaneous.

On Thursday, Minister of Human Settlements, Water and Sanitation Lindiwe Sisulu welcomed 24 Cuban engineers. This was nothing new. Since the inception of the South Africa-Cuba Agreement in 2001, Cuba has been able to impart knowledge on maintenance and operation of water infrastructure in the country.

In 2011, the first group of nine Cuban engineers came to South Africa, then the figure grew to 13 in 2013. Thirty-five Cuban engineers arrived in February 2015 and departed in March 2019. Last year, 25 engineers arrived and have been placed in the water cluster regions and some of our provincial offices. The latest group of 24 engi-

neers is therefore a continuation of a long-standing partnership between the two countries. This time, something about their arrival has conjured up stronger emotions than before.

Soon after the announcement, an opposition politician graced TV screens and used every opportunity available to criticise the decision to import Cuban engineers while “ignoring locally trained and unemployed engineers”.

He was soon joined by influential commentators and the Twitterati. It is difficult to pinpoint what is different from when the first group of engineers arrived in 2011 and now.

The suggestion that making use of Cuban engineers to assist in the maintenance of our ageing infrastructure ignores locally trained engineers is devoid of facts. Minister Sisulu has made it a priority to forge partnerships with the private sector, non-governmental organisations and other entities to find solutions on critical areas

that relate to the department she presides over. That much is also apparent in the National Water and Sanitation Master Plan.

The Cubans are not here for work. They are here to impart skills and assist municipalities maintain an ageing infrastructure. The Cubans have for decades kept their ageing infrastructure going, and are a handful of dedicated organisations lending a hand.

Gift Of The Givers has become synonymous with being the first to raise their hand to assist government whenever this is needed. In Makhanda (Grahamstown), they went to the extent of using their own finances to bring in expertise to assist the local municipality to fix their water infrastructure. When such organisations and countries assist, it doesn't mean that our own expertise suffers.

The Cubans will not be receiving exorbitant salaries, they will receive a stipend. The engineers are meant to complement the local capacity and

not to compete with it.

The department will proceed in its commitment to develop and employ local engineering talent as before through its own learning academy which has had great success to date. In the last financial year, we had 125 graduates in training, of which 51 were permanently employed.

Some time ago, African engineers in this country reached out to Minister Sisulu, indicating their availability for employment. This was the beginning of yet another important partnership.

These engineers are now prioritised in the specifications of projects in both the Department of Human Settlements and Department of Water and Sanitation.

The arrival of 24 engineers does not mean that government is reneging on its interventions to find ways to empower the youth of this country.

Polela is the spokesperson for the Department of Human Settlements