



water & sanitation

Department:
Water and Sanitation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

INTERNET ARTICLE

DWS resolute in its quest to ensure clean governance

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The assessment season for various government departments has come and gone. The auditor general expressed his opinion on all of them without exception.

Using audit terms like Qualified Audit, Unqualified Audit, Irregular Expenditure, Unauthorised Expenditure, Wasteful Expenditure, etc. the Auditor General (AG) opened a window for the public to see how the government spent its money during the 2015/16 financial year. The findings were his verdict on whether there were any civil servants who might have helped themselves to public funds. He gave a mixed bag of opinions.

Remarkably, for the first time in seven years the main account of the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) got a raving review by the AG. He gave the department an unqualified opinion, an indication that officials of the department are beginning to do things right. The perception out there is that government is, in its payroll, full of incompetent and of lazy officials who do nothing more than to dig their fingers into the fiscus.

However, DWS's performance in the year under review has demystified that. The department's annual report states a few drastic steps that have been taken to address maladministration and misappropriation of state funds.

It was a challenging year for the department and a lot of measures were put in place to achieve a milestone that was last reached in 2009.

Corruption has to a very large extent, affected service delivery in some of the government departments because of officials who are prone to dipping their fingers into the public purse. It is worth noting that the AG's findings on DWS were lauded by the Portfolio Committee on Water and Sanitation as encouraging. The department committed itself among others, to verify each contract and confirm the contract values.

Furthermore, officials confirmed all payments made and matched them against the correct contractor. DWS accounted for accruals against each contractor in order to obtain the correct commitment values. Also, the department had to ensure that its accrual list was accurate, complete and supported by valid invoices.

A total of 122 grievances were dealt with last year. Three employees were dismissed for misconduct after their cases went through disciplinary processes. In other incidents, employees who received the same sanction are still awaiting a final outcome of their cases after they appealed. A total of 23 disciplinary hearings were held during the previous financial year.

At least 19 disputes were attended to at the General Public Service Sector Bargaining Council. Sixteen of these were ruled in favour of the department and only three were against it. There were no strike actions in the department.

A lot of misinformation, unfortunately is being perpetuated the moment AG announces that the term "irregular expenditure".



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Irregular expenditure, financial experts warn, must be understood in context. It does not simply equate to corruption as some would have us believe. The term does not necessarily mean that the money was pocketed or found its way into personal bank accounts of officials. It simply means that the money that was budgeted for a particular project ended up being used in different projects that were classified as emergencies in the same department.

Take for instance the drought that has ravaged the country in the past two years. DWS had the moral and political obligation to intervene in municipalities that were crying out for help as their areas were left with very little drinking water, the amount which literally would last them for few days. Tswaing Local Municipality in North West is a classical example.

In January this year the District Mayor of Ngaka Modiri Municipality Councillor Lucas Makolomakwa sent an SOS request to Minister Mokonyane to ask for her urgent intervention. The town of Deneysville, with a jurisdiction of 30 villages, was left with three days of water and a natural disaster was looming. The next day 20 trucks that carried hundreds of kilolitres of drinking water rolled into the streets of the small dorp.

This was followed by the equipping and rehabilitation of boreholes as well as the drilling of additional boreholes in order to augment water supply. A two kilometre pipeline was constructed and drinking water was delivered to 2 421 households. The local pump station was refurbished and electrical cables that were stolen were replaced. Also, mechanical screens were repaired together with sludge valves.

The intervention means that the money that was budgeted for other projects in the department had to be used in drought-related emergencies. It was a matter of life and death situation.

The current drought in its form is an emergency as the government cannot sit back and watch as a disaster looms. In auditing terms it is irregular for any government institution to shift funds from the existing projects to projects that are not budgeted for. This begs the question, therefore, whether DWS was wrong to use funds that were budgeted for other projects to save lives in an emergency? Methinks no.

As long as the Director General can record and explain it, the department is morally and politically obliged to save lives. Under the circumstances it is permissible to rob Peter to pay Paul. The question of morality versus the law comes into play. The option for DWS was to approach Treasury either for authorisation to use existing funds or to ask for additional funding for the same purpose. Given the emergency of the situation in Delareyville, Minister Mokonyane acted promptly and decisively. I'm raising this point because DWS diverted a large chunk of its budget to deal with emergencies that were engendered by the drought in various municipalities.

I shudder to think what could have happened had the department not stepped in. Mine is a rhetorical question that has its roots in what happened in other countries that were affected by severe droughts before. The sight of gaunt women and children, surrounded by dead cattle, is not palatable.

It is for this reason therefore that South Africans must help the government to improve on its performance by observing the current water restrictions. The restrictions are a consequence of a persistent drought which has wrecked havoc in most parts of the country. They are a last resort to keep us afloat until the next decent summer rains. If the situation does not improve, government might be forced to introduce water-shedding.



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Let us all be responsible and save water.

Themba Khumalo