

## COMMENT



SIMPHIWE NGQANGWENI

## How science can contribute to fix social ills

THE Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated the need for humanity to collaborate, using science to find solutions to common and pressing threats.

According to the World Bank, more than 700 million people still live in extreme poverty. The poorest bear the largest cost of global challenges such as disease and malnutrition. Despite access to modern scientific tools, there does not appear to be a collective willingness to address these challenges.

Why can't science be used to solve long-standing ills such as poverty, inequality and hunger? Science has made, and continues to make, a positive impact on society.

The way we communicate, travel, the clothes we wear, the food we eat and the houses we live in are but a few examples. In the agricultural sector, we are enjoying the positive impact of the Green Revolution, a decades-long period of technology transfer that saw a dramatic increase in agricultural production and crop yields.

However, is science beneficial to all? Are scientific advancements only for those who can afford them? These are broad questions not directed only to scientists. Policy makers, the private sector, civil society, scientists and academia must collectively account for ways in which science is used for the betterment of society.

The 2022 edition of the World Science Forum (WSF), held in Cape Town in December – the first on African soil – provided the scientific community, public policy makers, industry, civil society and other stakeholders, a platform to exchange ideas.

The theme for WSF 2022 was "Science for Social Justice". I participated in one of the pre-events on "Science for Inclusivity, Innovation, Food Security, Nutrition and Social Justice".

My talk as a panellist sought to highlight the importance of real partnerships in ensuring that the benefits of science and innovation benefit all stakeholders. For this goal to be achieved, the foundation must be laid at the level of policy making. Policies must be crafted through a "co-creation" model, where all stakeholders participate fully and meaningfully.

As the head of the National Agricultural Marketing Council (NAMC), a policy-advisory entity of the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, I experienced policy co-creation in action during the drafting of the latest agricultural sector blueprint, the Agriculture and Agro-Processing Master Plan (AAMP).

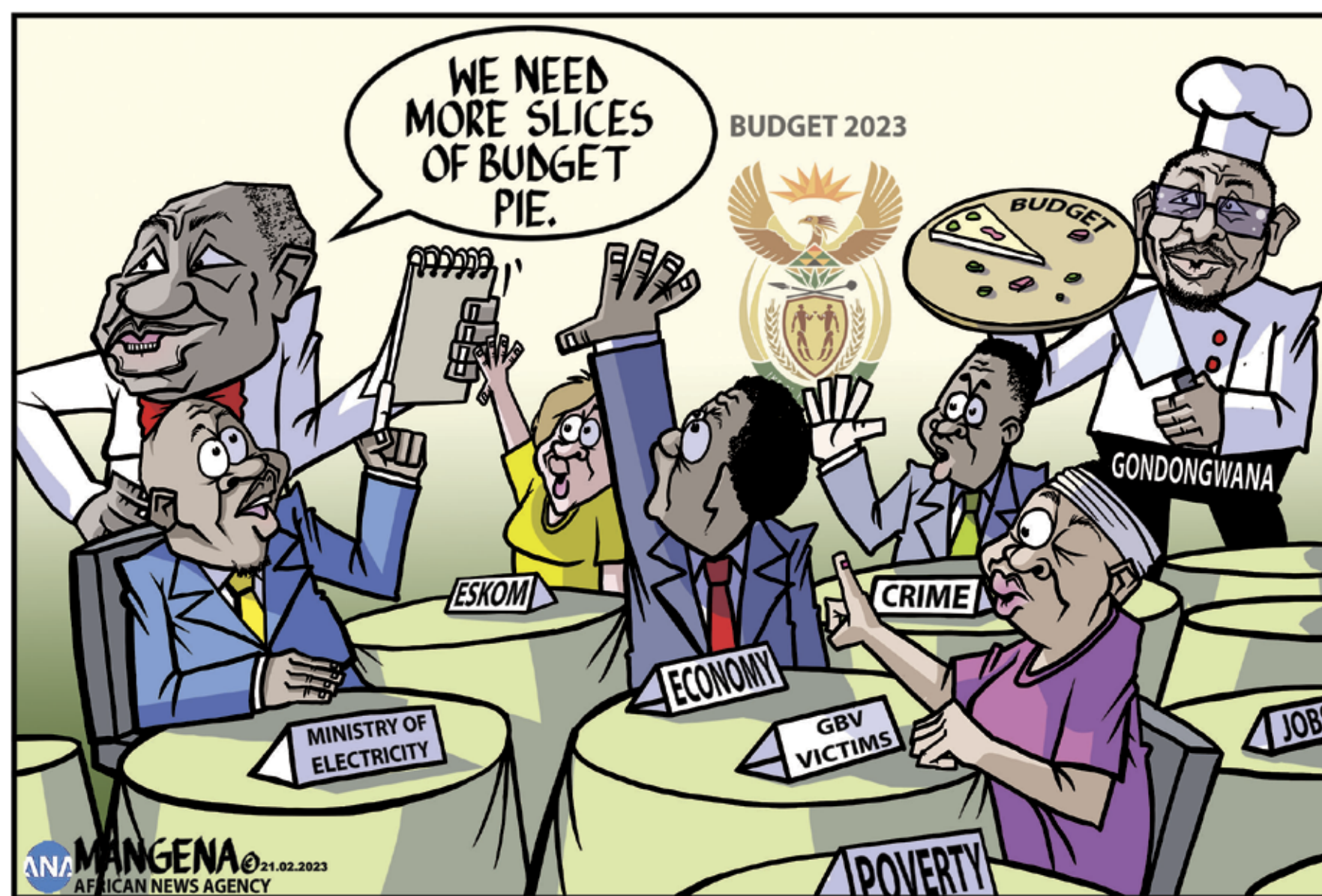
The AAMP document reflects a consensus among partners about what the agricultural sector needs to do to grow in an inclusive manner. Central to this is ensuring that partners jointly invest in technological innovation to increase food security – at national and household level. Its signatories committed to setting up platforms (to be overseen by the NAMC on which government, civil society, labour and business will each make resource contributions – real and in-kind) to its implementation, and active monitoring and evaluation.

Another good example of an effective partnership in science is the statutory measures that the NAMC oversees on behalf of the Agriculture Minister. One of these is the regulated collection and expenditure of levies by designated commodity bodies in the agricultural sector. Enabled through legislation, the sector collects and spends close to R1 billion, half of which goes towards research and development.

To ensure inclusivity, the NAMC ensures that at least 20% of the total levy expenditure goes towards black participants. The benefits of the statutory levies – especially for marginalised groups – are evident in many agricultural value chains.

As part of the AAMP, the government is committing to contribute towards the funding of black participants in the sector on a rand-to-rand basis to ensure maximum impact. Implementation is no longer the responsibility of only the government or private sector – it is a joint responsibility. If there is no meaningful participation by all stakeholders in dictating how the benefits of policy accrue – including those of science and innovation – there is likely to be a continued schism and perhaps even mistrust between those perceived to be exclusive beneficiaries and those who feel left out.

Dr Ngqangweni is the chief executive officer of the National Agricultural Marketing Council.



# This crisis now requires decisive leadership

*The bad news is that Ramaphosa is still playing for time*

## COMMENT



NKOSIKHULULE NYEMBEZI

THE good news that dominated last week's debate on the State of the Nation Address in Parliament is that President Cyril Ramaphosa has finally declared a national disaster on the electricity crisis and announced an imminent Cabinet reshuffle.

It will include an appointment of a Minister of Electricity in the Presidency, who will focus full-time on working with Eskom to end load shedding and replacing the deputy president.

Public announcements on crucial policy and governance matters remain pivotal in our public life. Even this year, it was inconceivable that there would not be some to appease a nation battered by months of rolling electricity blackouts and economic insecurity.

Ramaphosa claimed South Africa has turned the corner and is heading towards "calmer seas". In closing the debate, the president seemed to tell MPs and the nation last Thursday that he would do all that he must, but he was not unequivocal.

He needs to make his intentions crystal clear. Instead of implementing the urgent tasks of governing, he focused on accusing some political parties of making a mockery of Parliament and attempting to depict the country as a failed state.

Unsurprisingly, that is his usual style. For many months though, Ramaphosa has prevaricated on the timing and the details, and it always seemed to be never quite the right moment. Now, amid expectations that the worst of the crisis may be intensifying in many parts of the country, that excuse is running out of road.

The bad news is that Ramaphosa is still playing for time, to the country's



President Cyril Ramaphosa

detriment. Sona announcements are failing to cascade through the State of the Province Addresses already underway. The Cabinet reshuffle will not occur until the end of this month or later, which is an unreasonable delay.

When it gets underway, it will be lengthy and extensive to prioritise ANC factional politics above the country's best interests.

Yet, in a handful of provinces and municipalities, premiers and mayors should be taking a cue from the national government and announcing new executive members to stabilise the government and eliminate corrupt politicians.

Although the terms of reference of the state of disaster have not been finalised, Ramaphosa acknowledges that they must be wide, considering that 'in a time of crisis, a single line of command and a line of march is needed' and 'the crisis has evolved to impact every sector of society'. To address the crisis, Eskom will procure emergency power that is obtainable within six months to close the gap.

According to the Government Gazette, it has been declared to prevent 'the possible progression to total blackout from occurring, and taking into account the possibility to augment existing measures already undertaken

by the organs of state to deal with electricity supply constraint'.

The national state of disaster allows the government to make regulations and issue directions, bypassing some legislative steps. The gazette stipulates that these regulations and directions may only be taken to assist and protect the public, provide relief, protect property, prevent or combat disruption or deal with the destructive nature and other effects of load shedding.

The disaster regulations may help to hasten emergency power procurement – like power ships – and procurement of parts and services for Eskom's embattled power stations. It is a huge agenda.

No national state of disaster, starting this month, is likely to be complete before 2024 at the earliest. Even this may be optimistic. The net result is that the state of disaster interventions will not be in full force before the 2024 national and provincial elections.

As the pessimistic tone of the Sona debate confirms, this delay in announcing and implementing the crucial details of what needs to be done needlessly delays the learning and implementation of lessons, creating additional risk. It is also a deliberately undemocratic choice. It insults the people of this country, who have

been through so much, particularly the households and businesses that have suffered losses because of the electricity crisis and the endemic corruption that benefits the elites.

Parliament and civil society formations must continue to press Ramaphosa to bring the cabinet reshuffle date forward and reveal details about the role of ordinary people in overcoming the electricity crisis.

There is no valid reason why the Cabinet reshuffle and the delineation of roles could not happen sooner. There will soon be new opportunities to force the issue. The implementation of yet another steep electricity price increase coupled with the rising cost of food and other essential commodities is a particularly high-profile one.

We will find evidence in Finance Minister Enoch Godongwana's budget speech tomorrow. The debates on the premiers' Sopa in the nine provinces will likely highlight more evidence of hardship and indecisive leadership. All these events at national and provincial levels may make Ramaphosa's timetable unsustainable if pressure is adequate.

Several decisions can be taken in the coming weeks anyway so that we avert stage 8 of power blackouts as the country hits a grim new record as more than half (24 809MW) of Eskom's installed capacity of 48 000MW was out of service yesterday morning.

The many challenges facing our country need to be nailed down now through genuine consultation and decisive action. Public confidence and the need for inclusiveness require both.

The national state of disaster should also be unitary, covering the whole of the country, including the interests of rural communities. After all, this has been an electricity crisis affecting South Africa, and the whole of South Africa should be reflected in the planning and implementation of intervention measures designed to bring relief to it.

Nyembezi is a researcher, policy analyst and human rights activist

## LETTERS

Email [pta.letters@inl.co.za](mailto:pta.letters@inl.co.za) (no attachments). All letters must contain the writer's full name, physical address and telephone number. No pen names.

## Eskom, you should have it covered by now

WET coal is blamed for Eskom's latest increased load shedding. Come again? Rain has been and always will be with us, so preventive measures to keep coal dry are a given.

At what stage does the rain wet the coal? While being transported in trucks? There is something called a cover, used to protect items when rain is expected – or when caught in the showers, these are easily placed over the load.

Or does it take place where the coal is stored? One presumes the coal

is housed in proper enclosed sheds? If not, it's a serious oversight.

Or while being delivered to the kilns per conveyor belt? Here again, the journey from the coal sheds takes place under cover? Or does it?

Or are we missing something? A simple answer to the question where and why the coal gets wet would tell the story.

There might very well be a legitimate reason – but please tell us, don't keep us in the dark.

CLIFF BUCHLER | Claremont

## Kindness of a stranger challenges prejudice

I HAD to take an early morning flight from Johannesburg to Durban on Sunday. My son took me to OR Tambo International Airport. But as he had only five minutes to leave the car at the drop off zone he didn't have enough time to show me how to find my way through the departure section of the terminal.

As we were trying to get our bearings, a young woman dressed all in black in traditional garb from head to foot, approached us and asked me to follow her.

Pleasantly surprised and relieved, I followed her through the ziz-zag queue to the section for local departures. She asked for my boarding pass, went through it and then directed me to my gate.

Sadly, I couldn't get to see her face but her kind gesture had touched me. I have been critical of Moslem women wearing the traditional attire, especially the hijab. But this gesture gave me a lesson in how deceptive appearances can be.

T MARKANDAN | Kloof

## OPINION

## EDITORIAL

## FOUNDATIONAL PHASE IN SCHOOL A TOP PRIORITY

THE time has come for the government to fork out more resources to improve the state of the foundation phase of education.

If this is not done, we should forget about turning the tide on poor child literacy rates.

A recent report compiled by an advocacy group, 2030 Reading Panel, paints a bleak picture of the country's education, revealing that pupils at foundation phase were unable to read for meaning by age 10.

The report further points out that 82% of South Africa's Grade 4 children could not read for meaning.

This shocking statistic is, unfortunately, an increase from 78% pre-pandemic.

Perhaps what is particularly difficult to accept is that it would take 86 years on the current trajectory to reach 95% of children reading for meaning.

Therefore, addressing these deficiencies in the learning outcomes is not sufficient, but the speed at which this is achieved is absolutely essential.

The reality is that the lion's share, if not all, learners who constitute the 82% who can't read for meaning come from poor rural and township schools.

This means that our education system is not the equaliser of society that it is meant to be. If anything, the gap between the rich and the poor will continue to rise to a point where it is not sustainable.

The time to procrastinate is gone, and those responsible for our education need to roll up their sleeves and invest more resources in the foundation phase.

We dare not fail our children. The current trend where education officials spend a fortune to produce improved matric results, including winter camps and extra classes, is not the way to go.

Instead, the focus should be on getting it right much earlier. More funding should be set aside for the foundation phase, and better qualified teachers should be employed.

The focus should be on teaching children numeracy and literacy. The foundation phase should not be an afterthought but a priority of our education system.

We commend the Department of Basic Education for making the foundation phase compulsory at every primary school. The next step is to ensure quality education so that learners can cope with the challenges they will be confronted with later on in their schooling careers.

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