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LACK OF MAINTENANCE IS SLOWLY KILLING US

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In the midst of the ongoing sensational revelations about state capture and corruption, and the developing struggle for the leadership of the ANC, other important news often goes almost unnoticed. An example of this is the report card on infrastructure that the South African Institution for Civil Engineers (SAICE) recently published, with the help of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR).

They pinpoint a festering sore that is not only costing the country huge amounts of money, but which also could also kill us (literally and figuratively). SAICE has done intensive research into all kinds of infrastructure: water, sanitation, solid waste, roads, airports, railways, electricity, health and education. Based on their findings, they graded these categories (and subcategories). The ratings range from “world class” (A) to “unfit for purpose” (E). Between these are “fit for the future” (B), “satisfactory for now” (C) and “at risk of failure” (D). Their overall rating of South Africa's infrastructure is D+, down from a C- in 2011, just after the Soccer World Cup's infrastructure upgrades. This means that SA's infrastructure, according to the civil engineers (including those that work for the state), is “at risk of failure”.

Among the 29 subcategories there is only one A (the Gautrain) and four B's (national roads, airports, ports and heavy load freight lines). There are, however, 13 D's and two E's (the latter for sanitation in non-urban areas, and all gravel roads).

According to SAICE, this rating is the result of a continued lack of maintenance and neglect. Add to this a lack of long-term planning, inadequate funding, no management systems, poor data collection and skills, and the picture is complete: a country with infrastructure on the verge of collapse.

Infrastructure such as water, sanitation, roads and educational facilities are public assets that impact everyone, and as such should be wisely managed. They improve life expectancy, facilitate social mobility and access to economic opportunities, and help boost economic growth and job creation. Without infrastructure, no progress is possible - not the progress that the National Development Plan envisions, nor the realisation of rights that the Constitution has entrusted to Government as their mandate.

The basic question is: why do not we maintain our infrastructure? Why isn't there long-term planning and funding, and skills, and management systems?

The answer is complicated. It is a vicious circle along the following lines:

The basis of the problem is a chronic lack of political leadership and accountability. That which is happening on national level as far as state capture and corruption are concerned, sets an example which is emulated at other levels. And if the political leaders do



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not want to be held accountable, how will officials who have to do the job then be held accountable?

This creates a *laissez-faire* attitude towards service delivery in general, and infrastructure maintenance in particular. “I work to receive a monthly salary, and that’s it. The ambulance that is not serviced, or the electrical substation that blew is not my problem.”

But there is a factor that exacerbates this naïve attitude. Due to both the ideology of racial quotas and the failure of the education and training system, there are not enough trained and skilled people available to appoint in strategic positions such as engineers, financial managers and planners. The old experienced and skilled people were let go, and the posts are either vacant or filled by incompetent cadres. Skill levels are low.

With a chronic lack of skills, no planning can be done or budgets drawn up and adhered to. Even at national level, there are Departments whose annual reports are not submitted on time and where chronic mismanagement and wasteful expenditure occurs.

At this stage, the system of neglect and cadre deployment is already taking its toll. Because it has become the goal of the public service to create jobs for cadres, up to 75% of budgets are spent on salaries and consultants. There is literally no more money left for something as routine and mundane as maintenance.

The argument that we can save by postponing maintenance, is coming back to haunt us. Those maintenance costs double, or even triple, if delayed for a year. Just ask provincial departments where roads had to be completely rebuilt after years of neglect - at four or five times the cost of performing regular maintenance.

Where departments and municipalities are already under financial pressure on the salary front, it is often compounded by a lack of leadership and accountability, and cadre deployment, and this creates ideal conditions for corruption to creep in. And then the deluge of waste and ruin multiplies. The good people leave, and the money for maintenance becomes even less.

The consequences of this are captured graphically in the SAICE report card. The physical space in which we need to grow the economy, where education and training must be done, and where service delivery must be afforded to the poor, is at risk to fail and, in some cases, has already failed. The cases of pregnant women who have lost babies because ambulances in the Eastern Cape have not been serviced, or children in the North-West that died due to drinking contaminated water, are still fresh in our collective memory.

The tragedy is that SAICE by and large grades the infrastructure in rural areas lower than in urban areas. The poorest of the poor live in rural areas and services must be delivered to them. So again, it is the poor who bear the brunt of the repercussions related to lack of infrastructure maintenance. In this way, their constitutional rights are trampled. The rich



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and the middle class can buy their way out of badly maintained infrastructure, the poor cannot. And all South Africans' life expectancy and service delivery are getting worse.

What can be done? A few options exist. Choose other leaders and hold them accountable, especially for maintenance of infrastructure. It has already happened in some Metros last year. However, there are another four years to wait before the next local government elections. So, hold your current leaders accountable, including your ward councilors - that is the only mechanism for constituency-based voting. Work with civil society organisations that work in communities, for communities. Educate people to appreciate and understand the value of regular infrastructure maintenance.

If we don't work together and force government officials to do maintenance of our infrastructure, the lack thereof will slowly kill us all...