

21 AUGUST 2024

## BASIC EDUCATION DIRECTOR GENERAL SETS THE RECORD STRAIGHT ON SCHOOL FEEDING

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has been ready with this response since Sunday, but the discussions between the Minister and myself about our response is the reason for the delay to do so. DBE welcomes the focus of the *Sunday Times* article of 18 August 2024, “Gwarube halts R10bn school food tender”, on the modernization of the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP). It is important to point out from the onset that if one tries to create a tissue of lies in reporting a story, what it essentially means is that you are not telling the truth which is the case with this article. There are many inaccuracies, fabrications and falsehoods contained in the article cannot be left unchallenged.

*The DBE rejects the suggestion that it surreptitiously published the NSNP tender “at a time when it had no minister” says Director General Mathanzima Mweli. The tender was published on 22 July 2024 which was several weeks after the assumption of office of the incoming administration, adds Mweli. A simple checking of the facts would have confirmed this for the inept Andisiwe Makinana.*

The assertion that the management of the DBE concocted the modernization scheme for corrupt ends is also rejected. The DBE initiated the process for the modernization of the NSNP in July 2023. From a governance point of view, this matter was extensively processed by the Heads of Education Committee (HEDCOM) on various occasions during 2023 and working with the Council of Education Ministers (CEM) as the final model for the modernization was adopted by council in early 2024. Extensive records regarding the aforementioned remain available for scrutiny. The issuing of the final terms of reference (TOR) for the tender was thus based on the extensive processing of the modernization project by the relevant mandating structures of the basic education sector and not by the management of the DBE as the article alleges.

The further claim that the modernization project as endorsed by CEM somehow falls foul of the relevant legislative prescripts can also not be left unchallenged. The Director General affirmed *“The DBE had several engagements with the National Treasury on the matter and also obtained the opinion of a respected Senior Counsel on ensuring that the modernization process complies with the letter of the law”. “The DBE is convinced that the process it initiated is lawful in every respect and this has been confirmed by very senior and experienced officials from National Treasury in addition to the advise of Senior Counsel”*, *The argument that the DBE was “centralizing “the entire programme is a deliberate attempt to obfuscate*, Mweli emphasised.

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The rationale of the modernization project is to ensure that the state maximizes its buying power by creating a mechanism to afford maximum benefits from economies of scale. This would enable government to get better value for money and by so doing improve the quality and quantity of the plate for our children.

The NSNP has been underfunded over several years which has placed tremendous pressure on the ability of the programme to address hunger and malnutrition. In addition in the post-Covid period the programme has come under increasing pressure to admit poor children in quintiles 4-5 onto the programme. In terms of the conditional grant framework of the NSNP only quintiles 1-3 schools (the poorest schools) qualify for the NSNP. This article including those who seem to support it fail to place the learner at the centre of the modernisation as we have done but rather elect to elevate the interest of other parties to supersede those of the learner. *“The only reason why we are purported to be corrupt, is because we are resolute in acting in the best interest of the learner with the modernisation process”*, emphasises Mveli. *This programme is one of the oldest initiatives of the democratic government initiated to deal with poverty alleviation among children and our attempt at modernising the programme is intended to advance this objective”* Mveli Reaffirmed. We would like to challenge anyone to assess the veracity of the aforementioned.

The assertion that the department is seeking to award the contract to reach around 10 million learners daily to “a single entity” is pure mischief-making. It is a deliberate attempt to vilify the genuine efforts of the DBE to improve the NSNP for all children. *Even a cursory glance at the TOR would confirm that one of the central pillars of the modernisation model is the inclusion of small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) as well as small holder farmers, as part of a Local Economic Development (LED) focus*, reflected Mveli, In fact one of the reasons for initiating the modernisation of the NSNP is to better utilise the economic potential of the programme to benefit youth, women and people with disabilities. It is our intention to grow thousands of small businesses and to create more than 30 thousand additional sustainable jobs to the current programme.

The Department of Basic Education believes that the modernisation of the NSNP is an important initiative to ensure the optimisation of the social wage, reducing poverty and tackling the high cost of living for the poor which is in line with strategic priority Number 2 of the 7<sup>th</sup> administration. It is further important to note that the closing date for the NSNP modernisation bid has been extended from 15 August to 29 August 2024.

What is happening to the quality of investigative journalism in our country? Hopefully someone will follow the real story here, *Mveli Concludes*

**ISSUED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF BASIC EDUCATION**

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