The SOS Support Public Broadcasting Coalition and Media Monitoring Africa are deeply concerned by reports that Cosatu is calling for the SABC Board to be dissolved and calls into question its motives for doing so.

The call by Cosatu, according to the Eye Witness News\(^1\) report, comes after the SABC was reported to have asked Treasury for R1.5 billion in COVID-19 relief.

Cosatu's Sizwe Pamla stated that the Board should be dissolved because “not only are they destroying workers' lives, at the same time, we haven't seen anything that they're doing to fix the public broadcaster.”

- SOS and MMA are surprised at these statements as they appear to have no basis in reality. Since the appointment of the current Board (after the collapse of the last one in 2018): a qualified, experienced and functioning executive has been appointed;
- serious headway has been made on reducing losses;
- a detailed skills audit has been undertaken;
- thousands of contracts entered into by the Hlaudi-led management team have been reviewed;
- a Treasury-backed guarantee has been implemented to secure the financial sustainability of the SABC;
- an excellent set of editorial policies has been put in place for the first time since 2004 and which are in line with international best practice;
- the SABC has won plaudits, for the first time nearly two decades, for its election coverage of the 2019 national elections; and

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• the SABC has developed a Treasury-approved new operational model to right-size the broadcaster to ensure its financial–sustainability.

To the critical eyes of SOS and MMA, these steps represent significant attempts to “fix the public broadcaster”, contrary to the bald claims of Cosatu.

The characterisation of SABC’s Covid-19 Relief Request as “another SABC Bailout” is unfair and, in our view, untrue. We understand that the SABC, as well as a number of governmental entities and departments were, in fact, requested to submit applications for Covid-19-related funding from the National Treasury. The Public Finance Management Act in Section 30 (2) b and paragraph 6.6 of the Treasury Regulations for departments, trading entities, constitutional institutions and public entities, issued in terms of the Public Finance Management Act, 1999, provide for the allocation of additional funds through an adjustments budget to finance unforeseen and unavoidable expenditure within a financial year. COVID-19, we can all agree, is one such unforeseen and unavoidable event that has forced the public broadcaster to change its programming to provide much needed public health messaging and educational resources in the public interest, as per its unfunded mandate. To date, this funding has not even been received by the SABC. And, as was the case with the previous Treasury-backed guarantee, such funding, assuming it will be forthcoming, will doubtless be ring-fenced for particular projects.

The SABC has reported that it has submitted bailout utilisation reports to the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies (DCDT) and National Treasury, detailing the expenditure of the last R3,2bn bailout and according to the broadcaster, the funds were spent on addressing historical financial problems “by settling outstanding accounts from service and content providers; Investing in new compelling content; and the maintenance of, the SABC’s technology and infrastructure.

That Cosatu is attempting to paint a picture of the SABC current Board and management as being as inept as previous incarnations is simply factually inaccurate.

SOS and MMA are of the view that the SABC’s Board, management and, particularly, its news coverage, has improved significantly in the past three years and is much more able to tackle the difficult role of providing news and information essential to developing an informed citizenry in tackling the Covid-19 Pandemic and in the run up to the 2021 municipal elections, than has been the case since at least 2007.

The current state of factional paralysis in the ruling party and its alliance partners is damaging many aspects of the state. It is critical that the SABC does not, one again, become a battle ground for these. So the unsubstantiated attacks on the SABC by Cosatu causes us to question what is going on behind the scenes? Who would benefit from the collapse of a functional and good SABC board and management? What political role might be being played here?

3 https://www.sabc.co.za/sabc/sabc-responds-to-cwu-statement/
Cosatu’s key aim appears to be to halt the s189 retrenchments process. Post-Apartheid labour laws were designed to provide workers and unions with the tools to fight back on irrational and unfair retrenchment processes and other operational issues. We have faith that the CCMA and the Labour Court has the skills and expertise to secure fairness in this process. We are extremely disappointed that Cosatu has made this call. It is at odds with civil society’s traditional unity on wanting a capable, excellent, independent public broadcaster. In our view, attempts to manufacture a governance crisis, where none exists, through a call for a board dissolution will not save the SABC and it certainly will not save jobs at the SABC. It might indeed lead to the total collapse of the broadcaster with thousands of resultant job losses.

What is certain is that Cosatu’s call opens the door to irregular political interference in the operations of the SABC which would plunge it straight back into the disastrous era of instability, incompetence, corruption and state capture from which the SABC has only recently emerged.

ENDS

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