



17 Donovan Road, Glen Austin, Midrand, Tel: +27 (0)64 615 7918, E-mail: nwasa.info@gmail.com,
Website: <http://www.nwasa.org.za>

12 March 2021

STATEMENT ON THE PRESIDENTIAL EMPLOYMENT STIMULUS PROGRAMME (PESP) SAGA AT THE NATIONAL ARTS COUNCIL (NAC) OFFICES

The National Writers Association of South Africa (NWASA) notes in distress the protracted saga at the National Arts Council of South Africa (NAC) offices over the Presidential Employment Stimulus Programme (PESP).

In November 2020, the PESP was announced as part of government's response to the rise in unemployment due to the outbreak of coronavirus pandemic. R500bn was granted to government departments to disburse across various sectors of the society with the view to promote innovation and reignite job opportunities. R300m was allocated to the NAC to distribute to the creative industry through the sponsoring of various projects proposed by individual artists and organised formations.

The dispatchment of funds was supposed to be concluded by the end of March 2021, but was instead halted as early as January 2021 at the time of issuing of grant letters to and the signing of contracts by successful applicants. Meanwhile, allegations of various forms of improprieties began to surface towards the end of tenure of the Council which was overseeing the distribution of funds. Among some of these are that some Council members benefitted from the funds while substantive amounts were also given to entities not related to the arts. Even more shocking are claims that some individual applicants received money to the tune of between R9m and R11m for their projects whilst from the reduced amounts, other applications received as little as R50 000.00. – or even less!

Upon assuming office, the new Council conceded that there were problems with the disbursements and other processes, and that these problems were severely affecting the lives of artists. The manifestations of the problems were that some artists are reported to have faced eviction from their rented houses due to lack of payments, others sold their tools of trade to get by, while a few are said to have either harboured suicidal thoughts which some eventually effected.

In trying to solve the problem, the new Council exacerbated the situation. Firstly, it rightfully or wrongfully suspended the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Chief Financial Officers (CFO) and replaced them with some current staff members. It also cut the money allocation to individual project by 70% in some instances.

On 3 March 2021, a group of about 20 artists, led by the opera singer Sibongile Mngoma, staged a sit-in at the NAC offices in Newtown, Johannesburg, demanding answers about the controversies around the PESP. To date, the stalemate remains unresolved.



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There are graphic tales by several individual members of NWASA about how they are affected by the situation. Notwithstanding the validity or otherwise of the individual claims, the organisation opted to adopt a broader approach in adding its voice against any form of administrative malfeasance as guided by its founding documents. NWASA's Membership Credo states, among others, that:

My integrity and my self-respect are my pride and honour; my talents and knowledge are the hallmarks of my personality with which I will strive to, without favour and prejudice, expose some of the socio-economic and political challenges confronting my country and the world and try to provide some solutions thereto. To that end, I shall neither fear nor bow down to any human-made system that deliberately creates discrimination, inequality, and instability in the society in which I live and practice my craft.

In its Founding Declaration, NWASA further states that :

We note that, historically, South African writers have made an immense contribution on the national, continental and global stage to the struggle for cultural, social, political, economic, environmental and gender justice, as commentators, narrators, expositors, thinkers, interpreters and interrogators of social reality and as voices of the personal and collective experiences of our people.

In South Africa, organisations such as the African Writers Association (AWA), Congress of South African Writers (COSAW), and several others played the important role of consolidating the contributions of writers by providing platforms for the development of quality of writing, readership, publishing, promotion and distribution of literature.

They have produced ideas and literary works of art that offered compelling critique of society, gave directions and helped to shape an African worldview. They have played a pivotal role in the liberation movement and beyond. Through the power of their words, they have built a framework for moulding our freedom. The democracy we enjoy today is a direct result of their creative energies.

Against the afore-mentioned, NWASA condemns in strongest terms possible any act of commission and/or omission by government in particular and some societal agencies, that would make the lives of artists unbearable and careers untenable, as is seemingly the case now with the PESP saga. It is our considered view that it is rare for any warring party to altogether eventually come out fully objective from a protracted dispute.

We, therefore, call upon President Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa to proclaim thorough investigation by agencies such as the Special Investigation Unit (SIU) into the PESP controversy and to refer for prosecution any wrong doing bordering on criminality conducted by any role-player whatsoever in the mishandling of the PESP funds.



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We call for fair-minded and good-faith engagement with Sibongile Mngoma, and her colleagues together with whom they are continuing with the sit-in, complemented by the provision of relevant and up-to-date information related to the PESP disbursements, with a view to resolving the situation, as well as finding constructive ways forward.

We further call for conversations around possible review of the country's funding models to cultural practitioners and organs of civil society by institutions such as the National Lottery Commission and the South African Music Rights Organisation (SAMRO).

Lastly, we also demand the implementation of the revised White Paper on Arts, Culture, and Heritage by Minister Nathi Mthethwa, as well as the urgent revamping and/or repurposing of the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture (DSAC) so as to serve its constituencies better true to the principle of *Batho Pele!*

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Nawa', enclosed in a faint circular outline.

Dr. Lebogang Lance Nawa

Secretary General

NWASA is an assembly of established and aspirant writers in South Africa who gather to develop, promote, share and disseminate literature and their literary works among themselves and the general public in South Africa and beyond. It was established on 25 May 2018 out of the need for a national writers' movement that will advocate for literature, advance and defend the rights and interests of writers and work towards the development of the quality of writing, readership, publishing and distribution of literature. Its membership is open on a voluntary basis to South African citizens and non-citizens based in South Africa and elsewhere. Already, it has presence in countries such as Angola, Austria, Canada, Democratic Republic of Congo, Germany, Ghana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Nigeria and Zimbabwe.