

SOS: Support Public Broadcasting Coalition

22 Art Centre, Suite 1, Cnr 4th Ave & 6th Street,
Parkhurst, 2193, Johannesburg

Phone +27 74 690 1023; +27 76 084 8077

Email carol@soscoalition.org.za

sekoetlane@soscoalition.org.za



The SOS Coalition Finally Meets with the SABC

On Wednesday the 22 of August the SOS Coalition met with GCEO, Lulama Mokhobo, and her executive team at the SABC.

Key issues on the agenda covered three broad themes: the SABC's funding crisis; the focus of its business and operations; and its prospects for the future, especially at this watershed moment as South Africa gears up to move from the analogue to digital broadcasting environment.

Funding

In line with the series of media reports we've seen in the last week as well as Communications Minister, Dina Pule's [statement](#) to the same effect, the SABC reported that it was steadily on its way out of the red and was doing well financially. Despite the close to R1bn in outstanding revenue it has yet to collect from advertisers, Mokhobo claims the SABC, was showing good growth, enabling it to service the commercial loan which National Treasury agreed to guarantee last year very well. While we have no reason to doubt the GCEO's comments, it would be beneficial if the Annual report were made readily available to verify the degree to which SABC is climbing out of the red.

While the Coalition welcomes this outstanding development, we continue to seek access to the Turn-Around Strategy against which the broadcaster's performance was appraised in order to independently verify that not only is the SABC, indeed, resolving the financial troubles it has long been beleaguered with, but that these efforts show a demonstrable commitment to promoting the SABC's core business which is providing quality public service broadcasting for South Africans.

Despite raising the issue that one of the key conditions of the guarantee was that the SABC drastically controls its wage bill and reduce its headcount, (we understand this figure to be between 400 and 500,) Ms Mokhobo asserted that with the SABC being one of the biggest employers in the broadcasting sector, it should not proceed with staff retrenchments as this

would run contrary to the national imperative of creating 11-15 million jobs by 2030. She added that to simply “cull people” is unfair and cruel and that staff retention and job creation was important to the SABC.

She further conceded to the Coalition’s consistent position that SABC’s current funding model which has effectively left it to operate as a commercial entity despite its significant responsibility to perform a public function had to be reviewed. She stated that she had been discussing the matter at various forums, including Parliament, speaking on the SABC’s current funding model and how overly restrictive it is in enabling the broadcaster to deliver on its mandate.

The Coalition notes Ms Mokhobo’s and the SABC’s reluctance to effect retrenchments. As is often the case, junior operations and production staff who are crucial to the SABC’s ability to meet its public broadcasting mandate, would, most likely, be the worst hit by such a move. Nevertheless, we still firmly believe that the SABC is still over-burdened at the middle-management level, which not only has grave implications for its wage bill and financial sustainability, but also impedes its capacity to excel at its public broadcasting function because of over bureaucratisation.

We further commit to working together with and supporting Ms Mokhobo’s efforts to lobby for a full review of the SABC’s funding model in order to equip it to becoming a sustainable and premier public broadcaster that reflects, educates and entertains South Africans

Focus

With the long-awaited migration from analogue to digital broadcasting platforms set to officially begin in September this year, the SABC is faced with the herculean challenge of proving itself a trusted and premier broadcaster to South Africans.

To this effect, Ms Mokhobo reported the broadcaster’s readiness for the Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) switch-on date upon which its three channels will be broadcasted as well as the 24 hour news channel. The channel will first be launched as part of the pay-TV broadcaster DSTV’s bouquet. She did not disclose any details on the SABC and multichoices agreement except to say that it would not be part of the Multichoice channels.

Answering our questions on how the platform would impact on its programming, especially in respect of its poor performance in meeting its local content and language quotas, Ms Mokhobo asserted that based on its own calculations, the SABC was, in fact, meeting these with the exception of minority languages provisions. She, however, indicated that in proving its commitment to providing programming which resonates with South Africans, the SABC has made an allocation towards the procurement of local content, the amount of which the Coalition is aware of. She further committed to making the logs of the SABC available to SOS for its own analysis, and to open up and invite interrogation of their own monitoring structures within the SABC, as well as its reporting methodologies to ICASA.

While the Coalition congratulates the SABC on its DTT readiness and applauds its efforts to procure fresh and local content, we remain concerned about several issues.

The first of these is the broadcaster's choice to launch and carry its 24 hour news channel on DSTV. While Ms Mokhobo explained that this was a commercial decision which would enable the SABC to establish itself as reputable news source and, through Multichoice, attract a "lucrative market" of South African news viewers, and decision makers who would be attractive to advertisers, the Coalition is of the firm view that this move is another case where the SABC has lost sight of the focus of its core business: strengthening and promoting public service broadcasting.

By launching and broadcasting on pay-TV, the SABC will not only be wholly undermining the multi-billion Rand efforts to attract South Africans to migrate onto the DTT platform, but will also help edify DSTV's absolute market dominance over viewership to its own detriment.

The Coalition is further concerned by Ms Mokhobo's emphatic claim that SABC TV meets its local content and language requirements. Independent [research](#) conducted by Media Monitoring Africa, reveals an inordinate amount of international content, repeats and over emphasis on English in programming.

The Coalition has consistently emphasised that a marked improvement in the quality of its programming, particularly in respect of new and local content, is integral to raising the country's trust in the SABC as well as convincing South Africans to go digital.

In this regard, Ms Mokhobo and her team have indicated their commitment to steering the broadcaster back to its public service function through its upcoming editorial policy review campaign. Part of this will include public consultations with the nation on what kind of content it would like to see on its screens.

The SABC is required by law to review its editorial policies every five years yet the last such review was in 2004. The Coalition hopes that, this time, this process will be prioritised, actually happen in earnest and truly be as consultative as it should be. We believe that this process is only happening now undermines the SABC's claim of DTT readiness and, in fact, necessarily points to the contrary.

The SABC has also committed to allocating resources towards the procurement of fresh and local content. The Coalition is pleased to see an acknowledgement by the SABC that original local content is at the centre of its success.

While this seems like a step in the right direction, we are nevertheless, concerned as to whether the amount allocated will be enough for the SABC to procure sufficient content of an adequate standard to both meet its local content requirements as well as gain the confidence of viewers. Based on a calculation using the SABC's current commissioning

requirements, the allocation works out to only a fraction of the prevailing industry cost for such content.

It is important to underscore that being the public broadcaster and the largest player in the sector, the SABC is prominently situated in a position where it must enable and ensure that we have a vibrant broadcasting sector. A significant part of this means stimulating and leading the development of local content which speaks to our diverse nation. This can and should not only be done both internally, through the productions staff under its aegis, as well as through content procurement deals with local independent producers, but can also be buttressed through more collaborative links with the community broadcasting sector which also serves the same, albeit, more localised public service function.

Future

The SOS Coalition has consistently decried the instabilities in the SABC's governance and maintained that the stabilisation of its management team is integral to steering it into a sustainable and prosperous future. It is in this regard that we reiterate our call to the public broadcaster to urgently fill the several strategic positions it still has vacant.

Now, rather than later, is the most opportune moment for the SABC to start looking to asserting itself as the premier public broadcaster it should be instead of putting out short to mid-term fires as it has been over the greater part of these last 5 years.

To this effect, Ms Mokhobo has committed to nurturing an ongoing and collaborative relationship with the SOS Coalition in order to assist the broadcaster in finding effective and workable solutions which put quality public service broadcasting to all South Africans first, a move which we have warmly welcomed.

With diverse, representative and quality public service broadcasting being a critical tool in the democratisation of our nation, it is important that we treat the SABC as a public utility and not a commercial enterprise. We therefore call upon all South Africans to join us in building the SABC and supporting public broadcasting.

The SOS Coalition represents a number of trade unions including COSATU, COSATU affiliates CWU and CWUSA, FEDUSA, BEMAWU and MWASA; independent film and TV production sector organisations including the South African Screen Federation (SASFED); and a host of NGOs and CBOs including the Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI), Media Monitoring Africa (MMA), and the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA-SA); as well as a number of academics and freedom of expression activists.

For more information contact:

Carol Mohlala

Coordinator

carol@soscoalition.org.za

(074) 690-1023

OR

Sekoetlane Jacob Phamodi

Campaign Organiser

sekoetlane@soscoalition.org.za

(076) 084-8077

Report Issued By:

Carol Mohlala

Coordinator

SOS: Support Public Broadcasting

carol@soscoalition.org.za

(074) 690-1023