



ROADS, RAILWAYS, HARBOURS – CRUCIAL ROLEPLAYERS IN SA'S FOOD SECURITY.

“Who is going to save our broken, beloved country?” A citizen’s cri de Coeur from the letters page in a national newspaper (8.5.22). He asks where was the ANC while SA was being plundered? Where were they indeed! And where are they now as the plunder and destruction continue? And if SA children are eating sand because they are famished, who is to blame?

The collapse of crucial infrastructure in South Africa, a direct result of ANC misrule, has resulted in poverty and serious hunger straddling the land.

Those whose mismanagement, corruption and inefficiency have caused the crippling of three vital pillars of food security – roads, railways, and harbours - bear special blame for creating a situation which has shocked those who thought SA would never cross the line to real third world status.

Close to 200 children died of malnutrition in January and February this year. “This is in a middle-income country with what is regarded as the best social welfare system on the African continent, if not among all the nations making up the global South,” says S’Thembiso Msomi, writing in the Sunday Times (8.3.22). Malnutrition is a serious problem in rural and urban areas. The government’s child support grant is no longer adequate to feed families who have no work and who depend on state handouts to survive. Yet agricultural economist Wandile Sihlobo says SA has the highest level of food security in sub-Saharan Africa and is a net exporter of food. SA exports half the food it produces. Trade data just released for the first quarter of 2022 shows exports are up by one per cent year on year, with an increase of 6% quarter on quarter. The African continent is the largest market for SA’s agricultural exports, accounting for 41% in value terms.

Thus, not only SA is served by 35 000 very productive farmers. Yet north of the Limpopo River, famine is even worse than in South Africa.

So, what is the cause of this tragic African food dichotomy? Under ANC rule, South Africa’s border control collapsed and millions of people from the African continent and points further east flooded the country. Whatever

anyone asserts, no one really knows what the country's real population figure is. Poverty has spread its shadow to the country's four corners. The cost of living has skyrocketed, and not because of Ukraine! The reasons for this are closer to home, and they are endemic. The availability of food is not the problem. It is food on the table for millions who simply cannot afford it. Despite the many debilitating factors dragging down SA's world-class agricultural sector, farmers produce the food 24/7. But it doesn't get to where it's needed. No one in his right mind would have imagined that a government professing to be "for the people" would have allowed the destruction of our railway system, the crippling of our harbours and the gangsterism now infesting road transport which has directly increased the cost of food for the table.

Within the food export/import industry, incalculable damage has been caused by the increasing assault on road transport over the past few years, with the July 2021 Durban/Gauteng riots exposing the impotence of the SA Police and the Defence Force. They watched helplessly as plunder, pilferage, murder, and mayhem took over in Durban and parts of Gauteng. The trucking industry took the hardest hits. In a country where trucks and road haulage transport around 85% of South Africa's goods, this is a sobering consideration.

NOT NEW

The mayhem is not new. In June 2019, economist the late Mike Schussler called the then dramatic assaults on trucks on particularly the N3 highway as "economic sabotage". (This road is the primary lifeline for the country's economic hub of Gauteng.) SA truck drivers threatened SA hauliers with violence if they didn't immediately get rid of foreign drivers. Despite high court judgements against the locals' violence, 17 trucks were set fire on the N3 in June alone and this highway between Gauteng and Durban was closed for hours. According to Schussler, there were at the time 250 000 trucks on South Africa's roads. Many drivers fled for their lives under these criminal onslaughts. On the N2 highway between East London and Kokstad, conditions were so bad that trucks were forced to travel at 30 km per hour, allowing locals to simply climb aboard and steal what they could. Over the previous 12 months to June 2019, these assaults cost 200 lives while 1200 trucks were damaged or destroyed at a cost of R1,2 billion.

Two years later motorists were being warned against iron spikes on roads. On the N1 between Polokwane and the Kranskop toll plaza, this practice has increased. Criminals hide near the highway at night and assault motorists who have stopped, sometimes killing them. The criminality is unabated. Where is the Minister of Transport? Inspecting potholes in Gauteng? Giving speeches in Parliament?

In May 2022, a husband and wife with a nine-month-old baby headed towards Brits when they drove over rocks near the R512/Randburg exit. The man stopped to remove the rocks and was shot in the head. He was certified dead on arrival at the nearest hospital. In a similar incident at around the same time, a man stopped on the highway near the M17/Garankuwa exit at de Wildt to change a tire after driving over rocks. Robbers appeared and shot and killed him.

Sasria, the state insurance company that covers unrest, paid out R100 million in damage compensation caused by the burning and destruction of SA truck haulage. (Rapport 29.11.20) Premium increases were the result, and these were passed on to the consumer and are now being felt. More and more trucking companies have closed because of the uncontrolled road violence. The destruction of road haulage vehicles affects agriculture, the retail industry and construction, inter alia. One trucking company just shut its doors due to violence: its fleet of 200 trucks now stands idle in a parking lot.

COLLUSION OF AUTHORITIES

One of the most horrifying aspects of this road conundrum is hijackings and alleged collusion with authorities. Juanita Maree, CEO of the SA Association of Freight Forwarders, says truck hijackings are “helping to tear the heart out of the country’s supply chain, and far from stopping them, the authorities seem to be colluding with the perpetrators”. (Sunday Times 12.6.22). “It seems that the hijackers are very much aware of the contents of sealed containers,” she said. “They are hijacking trucks transporting high-value containers. They don’t attack trucks carrying low-value cargo.”

She suggests there are many more people involved in hijacking than the thugs who commandeer the vehicles. “We’re talking police, border police and other government agencies and officials. Through them this information becomes available.” Truck hijackings have increased 31,4% in the fourth quarter of the 2021/22 financial year. It is interesting that this same Ms. Maree warned a year ago that one of the most damaging consequences of the rioting that brought 78% of trucks in KZN to a halt, closed key transport corridors and disrupted supply chains, was the loss of trust in SA as the “gateway to Africa” among global companies. She said in 2021 that “the rot set in three years ago - in 2018 – when the government failed to act against the looting and burning of trucks carrying the products of clients in the US, EU, and China from the port of Durban into Africa. They say, “How can we trust you”, she declares.

AGRICULTURE

Agriculture is especially vulnerable. Country farm roads are in such a state that many are impassable: farmers are unable to deliver their products to the central markets, let alone to a harbour for export. More than half of SA's local roads and a third of secondary tarred roads are in a very bad state according to a survey conducted last year by consultants Frost & Sullivan. Provincial governments in the Eastern Cape, Free State, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and Northwest are losing the fight to maintain their roads.

Farmers are themselves maintaining hundreds if not thousands of kilometres of rural roads: some have full time road maintenance crews. One farmer told the media he spent R200 000 over the last three years on diesel and road scrapers to maintain the roads around his property. This incident is multiplied thousands of times throughout South Africa's farmland. The cost of food has risen exponentially in relation to the state of SA's roads. Farmers are paying from their own pockets to transport their produce. There is no reimbursement from the authorities.

In a recent poll, almost 70% of farmers said that in the past book year, they repaired roads out of their own pocket. Potholes grace the landscape, causing serious damage to vehicles. This cost is factored in with other inset costs. As in many other sectors, farmers complain that the authorities in provincial and municipal offices simply shrug their shoulders when asked what will be done. Officials say, as always, that they have no money. This excuse has become the norm.

RAILWAYS

While roads are South Africa's beating heart, the country's railways are the skeletal structure that is now crippled. Zolani Matthews, CEO of the Passenger Rail Agency of SA (PRASA) says the organisation is in a "critical state" and that its infrastructure is not ready to run any modern rail network "despite the billions spent on modernising it since 2009". Where did the billions go? Into the pockets of ANC cadres, where else? Investigations by former Public Protector Thuli Madonsela and others as far back as 2015 revealed a "corruption frenzy" at the agency that ran into billions of rands between 2009 and 2015. (Sunday Times 14.11.21).

Last year the Office of the Auditor General told parliament's standing committee on public accounts that Prasa could not account for its assets, that its infrastructure was in disrepair and its ability to generate income was "diminishing". Whole rail networks, stations, electrical equipment and even rails and wooden sleepers have been stolen.

HARBOURS

Durban harbour is in such a state that last year, private citizens went to court to prevent anyone other than a private company from trying to repair the damage caused by government's lack of maintenance. At the same time as Minister Pravin Gordhan last year sought "partners in the private sector to invest R100 million in the repair of Durban harbour", South Africa's harbours were named "the worst in the world" by the World Bank. (Beeld 28.5.21), Cape Town was named the best in South Africa but fared worse than harbours in Djibouti, Abidjan, Beira, Maputo, Walvis Bay, and Mombasa".

This infrastructure debilitation eats into agriculture's good work in improving crops, moving into more active exports, and overcoming the endemic crime they must endure every day: stock theft, arson, road terrorisms and of course the legislation around expropriation without compensation. The roads, railways and harbours are bottlenecks instead of elements supporting good farming. SA farmers struggle to fill orders because they cannot depend on their country's infrastructure. Yet not a word of apology or solace is uttered by President Ramaphosa. Truly SA has become a travesty under the ANC.