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Dear Dr Pieterse

## COMMENTARY ON OPERATION VULINDLELA PHASE I AND II

AfriForum is a civil rights organisation that is committed to the protection and promotion of constitutional rights. The organisation focuses especially on good governance, community empowerment and responsible public participation. Our constitutional mandate includes the vigilant safeguarding of legality, transparency and fairness in public administration. As such, we are active participants in municipal consultation processes across South Africa. In line with our broader strategic vision of ensuring lawful, accountable and responsive governance, AfriForum actively engages with government on different levels on all issues that have an influence on the welfare of our constituents.

### Our understanding of Operation Vulindlela

It is in this spirit that we submit our comments on the 2020 intervention focus group Operation Vulindlela. This letter also follows on recent media coverage and reports on the success of the first phase of Operation Vulindlela, as well as the subsequent announcement of the second phase of the Operation.

AfriForum supports the *vulindlela* ('opening of the gates') for new investment and growth in South Africa, with a reduction of red tape, and institutional delays and bottlenecks. The use of structural reform as a tool to stimulate economic growth is after all not new concept in macroeconomics. With the successful reduction of policy measures that impede the efficient

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allocation of resources, the government itself are supposed to *vulindlela* ('get out of the way') of economic opportunities that created by communities for communities.

As we understand it, Operation Vulindlela was first introduced to the public in October 2020, as the world and the government were grappling with the unknown implications of the global Covid-19 pandemic. As part of a promise to reform (and save) the South African economy and keep investments safe in a volatile global economy, the South African Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan was announced at around the same time.

The focus of the Operation Vulindlela task team was at first quite clearly positioned to help implement this recovery plan, which morphed into more specific structural reforms that focused on the electricity, digital communications, water and transport sectors, as well as the visa regime. While none of the outcomes are new promises (see for example the NDP2030), a renewed drive to see changes happen can only be encouraged, and any successes are commendable.

Although we find it curious that a special focus group had to be called into being to help government departments do their constitutionally mandated duty, we are cautiously optimistic that this drive will improve service delivery in the long term. Historically, the South African government of the past 30 years has had no problem with devising new plans for any challenges; the record of actual successful implementation is not as impressive, however.

The decision to focus on specific areas that may influence investment in South Africa is applaudable, on the other hand. Our concern is that Operation Vulindlela is not a permanent mindset, but a politically driven initiative that is pushed by presidential insistence and therefore likely to collapse as soon as any regime change occurs. This fear of over-commitment to a new programme instead of enduring institutional reform is compounded by the announcement of the second phase of Operation Vulindlela. It is at risk of now becoming a programme in itself, instead of being the neutral- or minimum-cost government approach as promised at its launch.

## **Feedback on phase 1**

We would like to offer the following constructive feedback on the reported institutional successes that were reported as part of Operation Vulindlela's first phase. Ascribing the results of Operation Vulindlela to the initiative only, there are three fundamental issues that we feel must be raised:

1. Many of the completed tasks were already on the books (NDP, etc). By adding these to the list of completed Operation Vulindlela tasks may demotivate departments to perform without external motivation. Given the current low performance rate of departments, this would be catastrophic. Operation Vulindlela should be opening the way – but beware of paving the way for less efficient departments without drive.
2. A lot of the change is driven by a need that was created in the first place due to mismanagement. This is especially true for the electricity sector. The rapid conversion to solar power generation and other alternatives by private users is directly related to the inability of the government to provide the service. Moreover, because economic growth has slowed down in the same period, electricity demands only seem to have stabilised.
3. The inefficiency of departments to deliver on their own must be addressed. By sidestepping the realities and creating alternatives for non-delivery, the fundamental issue will not be solved. Building capacity at all levels of government must therefore also mean that corruption and mismanagement must have real, imminent consequences. As such, the focus should be on capacity building and the repair of functionality, and not just intervention. And unfortunately, with every missed goal trust in government to deliver on their promises are diluted.

## **The impact of corruption and a failed system**

What would also be useful is the recognition that corruption and mismanagement are at the core of most of the institutional struggles. Most of Operation Vulindlela's targets are in fact systemic failures that would probably need a much deeper commitment to reform in order to be solved permanently.

Additionally, inviting the private sector to take part in government service delivery – whether as a funding mechanism or a direct service delivery – can only work if free market principles are respected. As such, structural reform is supposed to detangle administrative roadblocks for easier access to the economy.

This means the devolution of centralised mechanisms – and not more government control. This should lead to empowered communities who can organise and provide services to the immediate community on ground level. After all, the role of the government should be to ensure that its people are well provided for, with all services delivered.

### **Phase II of Operation Vulindlela**

Even though the priorities stated for the second phase are commendable, they are unreachable in nature. Most of the challenges are perpetual and enduring and would require long-term commitment: to “create dynamic and integrated cities to enable economic activity” is a lofty project that requires more than one decade to bring to fruition. The digital roadmap and the associated undertakings are especially ambitious given the current state of many government and municipal websites. We can only hope that these priorities would start with improving basic services rendered.

We cannot yet sing “Vulindlela” as joyfully as the late Brenda Fassie. To understand and monitor the progress of Operation Vulindlela, AfriForum respectfully request the following information regarding phase II:

1. What are the planned timelines for the priorities as set out in *Operation Vulindlela Phase II: A second wave of reform for more rapid and inclusive economic growth*? At announcement of phase I, there was specific time targets set for completion of projects which are not presented in this document. Understanding the time goals are crucial to evaluating the possible success of this new phase.
2. What are the “reform actions” (as per the first phase) for each of the seven priorities of phase II? How will success be measured in priorities where the scope is so wide-reaching (i.e. “dynamic and integrated cities”, “harness digital public infrastructure as a driver of

growth and inclusion”) that even the mentioned “priority reforms” are possibly multi-year projects?

3. What are the sunset provisions for Operation Vulindlela? If there is not a short-term provision, what are the succession planning for retaining the same focus (and projects) when a new president is elected in 2029?

Kindly acknowledge receipt of this letter and reply within seven working days.

Kind regards

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