

SAFI applauds local procurement amidst the need for hospital beds and temporary healthcare facilities

The South African Furniture Initiative (SAFI) commends the support from sponsors like Old Mutual and the Cape Town International Convention Centre (CTICC) who has, respectively, established a quarantine and temporary hospital facilities in the Western Cape, thereby meeting the growing need for temporary healthcare facilities in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to Bernadette Isaacs, Managing Director of SAFI, one of the major reasons for the lockdown was to properly prepare for the real crisis when the peak of the spread of the virus is expected in August and September this year.

“With the opening of the temporary hospital facility at the CTICC by President Cyril Ramaphosa on Friday 5 June 2020, we noted with pride that the local furniture industry formed an integral part to make this a reality,” says Isaacs.

Before the national lockdown was announced on 23 March 2020 by the President, SAFI and the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (dtic) completed the groundwork in the preparation of the Furniture Industry Master Plan (FIMP). One of the prime conclusions in the FIMP draft document is the need and opportunity for local manufacturing of products in the furniture and medical related industries, which in turn could be supported by a focus on local procurement.

Much of the medical, dental and veterinary furniture needed in South Africa is imported from places like Germany, China and the USA. This represents a potential opportunity for the industry. While some of the furniture required is very high tech and requires very precise specifications are met, many products are certainly open to being manufactured locally. This could play a big part in developing better trade and investment opportunities for local manufacturers as the market for such goods is not limited to South Africa – the SACU and SADC countries also import these items.

The old adage of “out of a crisis comes opportunity” rings true in the aftermath of the levels of lockdown, the COVID-19 pandemic and manoeuvring through the maze of rules and regulations during a State of Disaster.

According to Isaacs, the regulations had an impact on the level of specifications that was still in effect earlier this year. “We have the know-how, the ability and the desire to locally manufacture most, if not all, the furniture on a low to mid-range specification.” She suggested that it can only be done if hospitals, corporates and other organisations buy locally manufactured furniture-related products.

It's important to note that medical furniture does not only refer to hospital beds. This specialist category includes medical, surgical, dental or veterinary furniture such as operating tables, examination tables, hospital beds with mechanical fittings, and industry-related rotating and reclining chairs. Products like personal protective equipment (PPE), screens, desk screens, linen, chairs, sanitiser dispensers and facemasks are in high demand, and a number of local manufacturers used the opportunity to change their product lines in the short term.

"Some of our members, who are known for manufacturing office equipment, came up with new ideas to provide what is needed to support government and the health sector," says Isaacs. However, she highlights the importance of local content requirements with every product that is manufactured and the importance of bargaining council compliance.

"Because it's not business as usual and it can never be again, we recently placed a high premium on motivating our members to comment on the draft Procurement Bill," says Isaacs. "This could have a profound effect on procurement, tender processes and the general conduct of those involved."

During the opening of the temporary hospital at the CTICC, as well as the recent opening of the Old Mutual quarantine facility (MuPine), it was noted how medical furniture can have varying specifications. The beds in a hospital must meet a certain standard, and health workers must be able to move a patient from the bed to a trolley with minimum effort. In the case of a quarantine facility, most of the people staying there do not necessarily need immediate care, so a bed with a lower specifications level can be used.

The Chief Communications Officer at Old Mutual, Tabby Tsengiwe, confirmed that her company has always prioritised buying locally manufactured goods. "All the furniture, beds and linen used in the set-up at the MuPine quarantine facility were sourced locally," says Tsengiwe. She praised the efforts and quick turn-around times of the companies that supplied the necessary furniture.

Isaacs is not surprised at this. "We have many members who realised that, even with a very short term in mind, they can change the value chain in the interim to meet the extraordinary needs that are foreseen by medical experts.

The two facilities provide 850 and 300 beds respectively, but according to the Premier of the Western Cape, Allan Winde, "Thousands more beds will be needed."

"That is why we, as SAFI, see the furniture industry as an essential sector in the current crisis, and we call on government, organisations that provide funding, as well as those who are responsible for the procurement, to look at local manufacturers and buy from them," says Isaacs.

The research confirms Isaacs views and stresses the opportunity for everyone involved to make sure a much larger portion of the current R1.7 billion spend on imports, becomes available to manufacture locally. “With the necessary support and changes, we can halt a contracting industry and turn the decline into a significant increase leading to a prospering industry that contributes to the local economy and importantly, creates jobs in these difficult economic times,” says Isaacs.

These changes in procurement behaviour will have a knock-on effect on job creation and the sustainability needed for expanding the industry by turning around the current contracting economy of the industry.

“This is exactly what we are aiming for and with the fantastic support and partnerships we have with government, industry and manufacturers, the Furniture Industry Master Plan is now ready to be expedited to be implemented as soon as possible,” says Isaacs. “And by concentrating our efforts to include the medical related fields, exporting these same goods to SADC countries will be a reality sooner rather than later.”

Isaacs can be contacted at bernadette@furniture.org.za for a list of local manufacturers.

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