

SAFI celebrates past while preparing for the future

Following half a decade of serving the furniture sector in South Africa, the South African Furniture Initiative (SAFI) is celebrating its 5th anniversary by taking note of past successes and using that knowledge to springboard the organisation into the future.

According to Bernadette Isaacs, Managing Director of SAFI, the organisation was established as a joint initiative of industry, labour and government with the aim of promoting development and growth of the local furniture industry for the benefit of all stakeholders. “Since then, we took centre stage in our role of connector for an industry made up of many small and medium-sized enterprises without access to policymakers, local and international markets and manufacturers,” she said.

The objectives of SAFI comprise the provision of market intelligence, facilitating training, mentoring and support to member organisations, promoting local furniture manufacturing and design, as well as facilitating access to local and international markets. Furthermore, according to Isaacs, SAFI aims to determine and facilitate initiatives and programmes to enhance the performance of the furniture industry, to sustain existing employment and create new employment opportunities by strategically facilitating relationships throughout the value chain.

Looking back over the past five years, the road to become a credible and pivotal role player for the industry came with various challenges, which included dwindling confidence in the South African economy from international investors, widespread unrest, unreliable electricity supply, labour issues and a shortage of raw materials. The sector employed 34 719* people in 2018 with another 7 728* employed in the informal sector before COVID-19, but with the subsequent economic downturn, widespread job losses and loss of income were reported.

Despite these challenging factors, major triumphs for SAFI included the adoption of the national Furniture Industry Master Plan (FIMP) on 29 March 2021, the establishment of the SARS Furniture Forum in June 2019 to address the Industry’s challenges and to provide support to inform trade and industrial policy directed at decreasing illegal imports of furniture into South Africa. SAFI also initiated the annual Furniture Sector Forum, launched in 2019 in partnership with Proudly South African, an annual knowledge-sharing online platform where core issues in the Furniture Industry are discussed. The 3rd instalment of this Forum will take place on 3 November 2021 when the future of the furniture industry and the restructuring of SAFI are some of the topics that will be explored.

“Reorganising SAFI into 7 chambers is an exciting development brought about by the recent adoption of the FIMP,” Isaacs said. “By accommodating the segments of the industry as outlined in the Plan, we are able to enhance the participation of SMMEs and focus on strategic relationships with stakeholders in the value chain.”

The past 18 months saw the sector laying the foundation to enable the local furniture manufacturing industry to grow into one of the biggest manufacturing industries in the country.

“I believe in the industry’s potential to become a key contributor to the country’s GDP, but collaboration between government, business and labour is key to the successful implementation of the FIMP, thereby assisting the industry to become more globally competitive while supporting the local value chain,” Isaacs said. “The holistic approach of the furniture industry towards sustainability, the environment and innovation is a revelation that will be supported and expanded by the FIMP.”

To highlight this, Isaacs mentioned five focus areas that could improve the industry’s contribution, namely enhancing design opportunities and the development of critical skills, trade interventions to address illegal imports, access to cost-efficient raw materials, export opportunities and transformation across the value chain.

“A lot has changed in the industry since the beginning of 2020 where sectors like office furniture had to pivot to furniture tailormade for the home,” says Isaacs. “The resilience of the furniture manufacturing industry and furniture design, coupled with skills training and learning opportunities, will go a long way to help South Africa become an international furniture force to be reckoned with,” she concluded.

** Source: Quantec (2020), updated.*

Ends.

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