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COMMISSION'S SCHOOL UNIFORM PROCUREMENT GUIDELINES CHANGE LIVES

Two years ago, Tshwane-based entrepreneur, Pamela Luthuli sold school uniforms from the boot of her car for two days a week. On a good day, she would sell up to five items per day. Some days she would return home without a single sale.

Today, Luthuli runs a thriving business producing and supplying school uniforms, tunics, golf shirts, blazers, tracksuits, and related clothing items to 10 schools in and around Tshwane.

Luthuli is the owner of one of many Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) that benefitted from the Competition Commission's (Commission) school uniform procurement guidelines. She used the National Guidelines on School Uniform issued by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in 2006 and the Circular on the Procurement of School Uniforms and other Learning-Related Material jointly issued by the DBE and the Commission in 2020 (Circular No. 11 of 2020) as a steppingstone to participate meaningfully in the value chain of the school uniform production industry.

"The school uniform industry was in my family's DNA. I know the business in and out but could never get to supply schools directly with my products. I would hit a brick wall and be told that they [schools] already have their preferred supplier," said Luthuli. But her fortune gradually changed when she learned of the guidelines and read about the Commission's awareness campaigns encouraging more schools to adhere to the guidelines and to practice pro-competitive procurement that supports SMEs and enables parents and guardians to exercise choice when buying school uniforms.

"The guidelines opened doors for me and many others. In approaching schools, I would also refer them to the guidelines and inform them about the importance of opening opportunities for entrepreneurs," said Luthuli, who now also employs five workers at Panda Uniforms and Projects to help keep up the demand for her products.

Luthuli's success, according to the Commission's Head of Advocacy, Khanyisa Qobo, underpins the objective of the guidelines. Pointing to a survey conducted in October 2022 to evaluate compliance with the guidelines, Qobo said many respondents (schools, parents, and suppliers) were now aware of the guidelines – a completely different result from 2016 when there wasn't much awareness about its existence.

"The survey found that contracts between schools and suppliers have been limited. It also found that schools have now largely reconfigured their uniforms to allow for a greater mix of generic and unique items," said Qobo, adding that there were improved levels of compliance with the guidelines.

The 2022 survey found that schools follow some procurement processes where exclusivity clauses are removed, and more competitive bidding practices are adopted. A large number of schools have taken steps to adopt the national guidelines as part of the school's governance.

Importantly, said Qobo, is that the guidelines and the work of the Commission have compelled all stakeholders along the school uniform value chain to promote greater levels of competition in the market.

A delegation from the Commission recently met with Luthuli to hear more about her journey as an entrepreneur. Visit <https://youtu.be/Ih5wzFBS0Jo> to watch a video of Luthuli's story.

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